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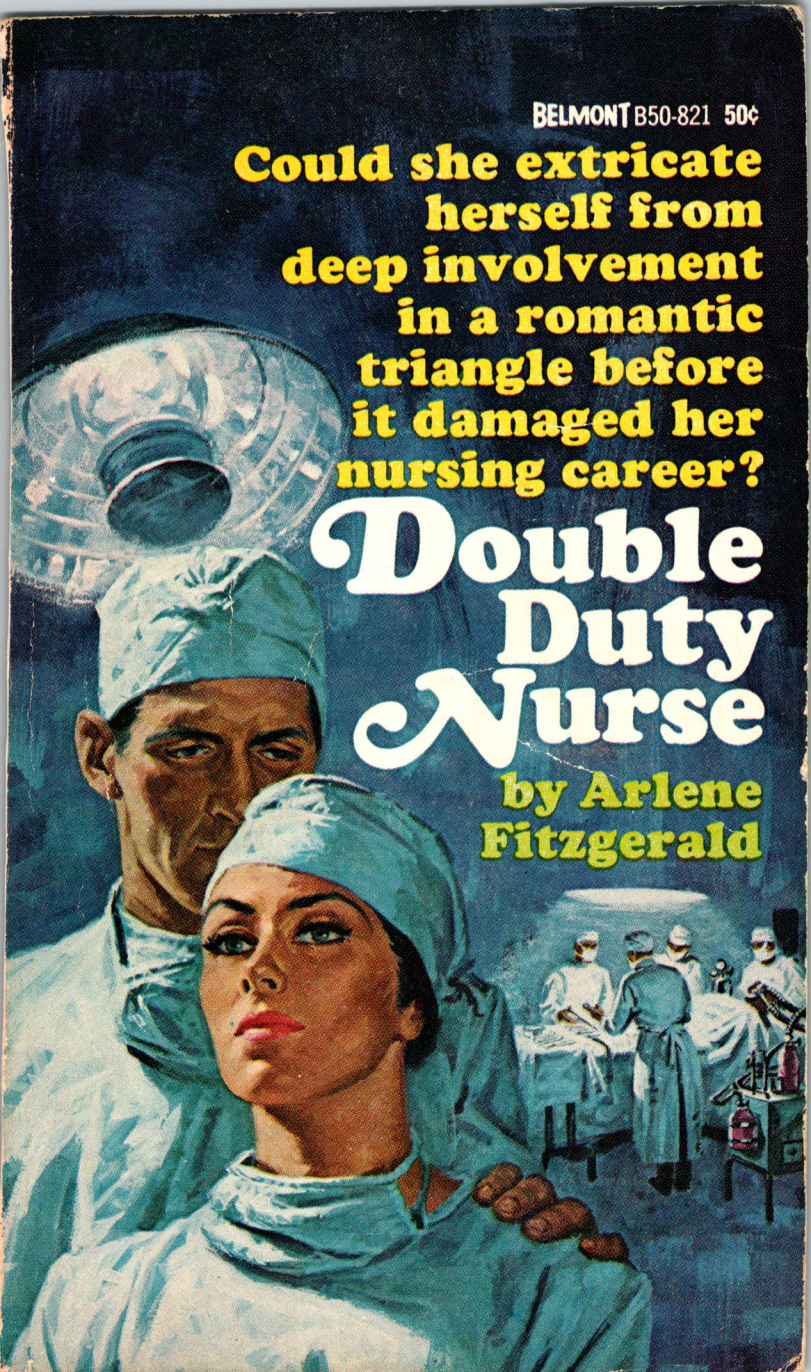
Double Duty Nurse

by Arlene Fitzgerald



She sat beside him frightened, as they spun along the graveled road. A nurse had a right to feel fear, she reasoned with herself. But not to show it.

Dr. Malone needed her. And she was committed not to let him down. She straightened her shoulders against the back of the bucket seat, her eyes straining against the falling dusk, searching for the bright flares that would indicate there had been an accident ahead.

"There." She spotted a tiny red eye far down the long stretch of road. She watched the dancing point of light grow larger, as she gripped her nurse's bag with both hands.

Something warm brushed against her cold skin. The sensitive fingers of Dr. Malone's right hand closed over her own.

"It won't always be this way," he said softly.

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by Arlene Fitzgerald

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Double Duty Nurse

1

"Is THERE a doctor present?" The loud speaker crackled over the restless sounds of the rodeo. "Dr. Shan Malone? Where is he . . . ?" The announcer's voice faded as he turned to question the man standing behind him in the little booth above the arena.

Tracey Talbot, R.N., held her breath, waiting, her eyes never leaving the still figure lying shrouded with alkali dust in the center of the rail-enclosed arena. The young man lay limp, crumpled, just as he had fallen when the bucking horse pitched him off.

"Cinch busted," the man sitting on Tracey's left said.

Already, she imagined that she could see the first traces of shock in the pale face still partially shaded by an oversized Stetson. More than a saddle cinch had broken, she found herself thinking.

"It's time for Sue Ann Flannery up at Coyote Creek to have her baby," Tracey's aunt, Cory Flynn, was saying beside her. The small woman leaned forward, her body tensed on the narrow riser. "I notice Con Flannery isn't here today. Ten to one, Shan's been called up there to deliver Sue Ann. Something like this would have to happen."

"Isn't there another . . . ?" Tracey began.

"Shannon Malone's the only M.D. we have in Teal Lake," Cory Flynn said. "And we're lucky to have him."

Blue-jeaned, booted men, mounted on show horses, had moved into the arena below. They hazed the galloping, riderless horse along the fence rails, in an attempt to drive him through one of the narrow gates, casting anx-

ious glances at the wounded man as they rode, their far seeing eyes looking tense and worried. The loud speaker blared its question again. "Dr. Shan Malone?"

"I'm going down." Tracey jumped up suddenly, a slim girl, trim in new white Levis, a matching Western hat shading her blue eyes. Dark curls licked at the broad brim, framing petal smooth cheeks, apricot–hued from the long hours in the blazing July sun.

"You can't, honey. That bronc . . ." Cory Flynn looked at her.

"That man needs attention," Tracey said, sucking in her breath. "And bronc or no bronc, I'm committed to see that he gets it. Especially since there doesn't seem to be a doctor."

At that moment, a bull-chested, black-hatted man strode into the arena, seemingly oblivious to the riderless animal that thundered past him, his brows beetled beneath the brim of the faded hat as he walked with purposeful steps toward the injured rider.

"Bull Farrel," Cory Flynn said. "The boy's father. If he'd got Sonny a decent saddle, this might not have happened."

Tracey only half heard her, as she made her way through the tense crowd to the bottom of the bleachers that had been set up temporarily for the day's events. She was aware that her aunt was following her, as she tabulated the contents of the chic, hand–tooled bag slung over one shoulder. The bag had been Cory Flynn's gift to her when she graduated from Good Faith Hospital in June. It was well–stocked with the supplies that every good nurse carried. An accident could happen anywhere, anytime,—just as it had happened now, in the hot, dusty rodeo arena.

She tried not to think about the wild–eyed horse that had lifted its hindquarters with amazing swiftness and grace to pitch rider and saddle into the powdered dust, as she slid bravely between the weathered rails and hurried toward the thick–chested man who bent over the wounded cowboy.

"Sonny!" The big man scooped powerful arms under the boy's lean body.

"No! Don't move him!" Tracey heard herself shouting. "Leave him where he is, until a stretcher . . ." The horse pounded past her, raising puffs of alkali dust that billowed to choke off her words. She motioned with small impatient hands for the big man to take his arms away.

"You trying to tell me I can't carry my own kin out of the way?" The huge man's voice bellowed at her.

"That's right, Bull," Cory Flynn said from behind Tracey, before she could reply. "This is my niece, Tracey Talbot." Cory added, "Tracey's a registered nurse. She knows what's best for Sonny, right now."

Tracey hastened through the ankle-deep dust and knelt beside the unconscious rider, aware of the big man's huge girth next to her—the almost animal smell of his sweaty body, as she searched with quick fingers for Sonny Farrel's radial artery. The crowd above her waited, watching with bated breath.

"His pulse is still strong enough," she said.

"Just got the wind knocked out of him," Bull Farrel boomed. It seemed impossible for the man to speak below a bellow, which, Tracey thought, with the part of her mind that was attuned to her surroundings, must account for the man's descriptive name.

She noted, as she lifted her hand away from the victim's wrist to loosen the collar of his satin shirt, that Bull Farrel's son was the exact opposite from his father—fine-boned, slender. His ribcage, not protected as his father's was, by overlapping layers of adipose tissue, could easily have been shattered. The horse had pitched him off with terrific force. It was even possible that his spleen had been ruptured. The thought developed in her mind, without her actually being aware of it, until it was there, freezing her to her toes, even in that baking sunlight. Her blue eyes searched the young face for symptoms. She found herself wishing, as she directed the two men who had appeared with a stretcher, that the Dr. Shan Malone the loudspeaker had called for was present.

As she walked out of the arena beside the litter, she noticed that the bucking horse had been driven from the ring. The loudspeaker blared a name into the confusion, silencing the audience, that had become suddenly vocal. "Miss

Smokey Denton. The world's most beautiful and talented trick rider . . ."

A girl, her hair the most incredible shade that Tracey had ever seen—molten silver swirling beneath her broad-brimmed, jewel-studded hat like a cloud of vaporous smoke, galloped into the ring astride a silver-colored horse.

"The day's specialty act," Cory Flynn remarked. "Too bad Sonny has to miss it. He and Smokey are close."

"I told him to stay away from her and her wild horses," Bull Farrel said. "There are better things for Sonny than rodeoing."

They had reached the ambulance that stood behind the rough board sheds and corrals along one end of the arena. Tracey watched anxiously, oblivious to the stamping, snorting animals inside the crude enclosures, as the men carrying the canvas litter laid her patient—she thought of Sonny Farrel in that vein, now that she had involved herself—inside the ambulance. She climbed in to sit beside him, her face alert beneath the brim of her new white hat. He stirred a little, still dazed and pale. Not responding, as he should . . . She banished the thought, telling herself that it was too soon to know, if the wind had been knocked out of him, as Bull Farrel had put it. A blow, centered midway between the thoracic and abdominal cavities, could do just that.

As Bull Farrel turned to get into the front of the ambulance, she noticed that the big man's jeans were worn almost through, obviously from long hours in a saddle. His plain shirt, that had been the best when it was new, bore the same frayed signs of honest wear. Again, she noted the contrast between father and son, as she studied the young man who lay white-faced in the back of the long, slim vehicle. Sonny Farrel's clothes were cheap and flashy. Rodeo clothes, she thought, dirtied by his fall, identical to the garments worn by the majority of the young men who had stepped into the dusty ring to participate in the day's events—bull riding, team roping, bareback, saddle bronc, steer wrestling. The strange events had frightened her more than a little . . .

"I'll pick you up at the hospital," her aunt was saying.

"Someone will have to send out for Shan. Dr. Malone," she added, giving Tracey a quick encouraging smile, her weather-lined face looking suddenly youthful. "He should turn up in a little while, unless he's run into complications with Sue Ann." She paused. "Don't forget the party, honey. Soon as the rodeo's over, everyone will be headed for the ranch. I want to show off my favorite niece."

"I'll have to stay with the patient until Dr. Malone comes." Tracey gave her aunt a quick smile, wondering for the first time, why the only doctor in town had to go to Coyote Creek—wherever that was—to deliver a baby. Surely there were facilities at Teal Lake. A hospital, with O.B. rooms . . .

In the next instant, one of the men who had helped carry the stretcher closed the rear door of the ambulance. The other man climbed in beside Bull Farrel to take the wheel. Seconds later, they were careening along the narrow dusty road that led from the rodeo grounds into the small town two miles away. The buildings were visible through the heat waves that danced across the large upland valley, to beat against the rimrocks above brick and clapboard dwellings, challenging the shivering green poplars that protected the huddled little city from the glancing rays of the afternoon sun.

2

TEAL LAKE. The small, eastern Oregon town was named, Tracey guessed, for the long, narrow strip of water that shimmered at the southern end of the valley, its banks devoid of vegetation, the whitish alkali flats around it cracking in the July heat. Cattle tracks showed where stock from the surrounding ranches had gone to drink.

Accustomed to the lush greenery of western Oregon—she had lived all of her twenty-two years in Portland—Tracey had been unprepared for the astonishing openness of the "yonder country" that lay east of the Cascades. She had known that her aunt lived on a real cattle ranch. A big, broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped man had come to Portland when Tracey was nine to woo her mother's widowed sister. Cory Flynn had married him; had gone away with him to Teal Lake. It had been only a name on the map to Tracey—the place where her favorite aunt lived—until yesterday, when the small private plane, piloted by Cory Flynn's foreman, set down in the endless expanse behind the Flying Flynn ranch house, and Tracey stepped out for her first glimpse of the Teal Lake country.

The big man her aunt had married had been killed in just such a plane five years before. Cory Flynn had stayed on at the eastern Oregon ranch, assuming full responsibility. The Flying Flynn Ranch had become famous for its herd of Texas longhorns, and the square-bodied, tender-meated Herefords her aunt raised. There had been expensive gifts for Tracey through the years. On Easter and Christmas Cory Flynn had flown to Portland to visit with

her sister and her family. Tracey had looked forward to her aunt's twice-yearly appearances. Cory, who had no children of her own, had lavished affection on Tracey. She had wanted to take her niece back to the ranch with her on more than one occasion. But there had always seemed to be a reason why Tracey couldn't go.

Until now, Tracey thought. With high school and nurse's training behind her she had been free as a bird, when Cory Flynn's invitation asking her to spend the summer at the Flying Flynn had arrived. The months of nurse's training had been strenuous—long hours spent cramming her head with the innumerable facts that every good nurse must have at her command; days spent on her feet in the big wards at Good Faith Hospital, putting her carefully-gleaned knowledge to practical use, adding to it until she had come to feel competent in her Florence Nightingale role. As competent as any fledgling nurse could feel, she amended the thought, fear tingling through her as she glanced at her patient's pale face. Tiny cold beads of sweat had begun to form in the palms of Sonny Farrel's hands—shock. If her patient had only been stunned, he should have been responding by now. Instead, he had grown more pale, his face pinched, expressionless almost, as he rolled his head restlessly to one side.

"He comin' around?" Bull Farrel bellowed into the stillness of the speeding vehicle.

Tracey bit her lip in an attempt to stifle the alarm she felt as she reached for Sonny Farrel's pulse. "Not yet, Mr. Farrel," she said, hoping that she sounded more assured than she felt. Cyanosis. Pupils dilated. Pulse rapid, becoming irregular. Weak. Cold perspiration. The carefully memorized symptoms filed through her mind. She had witnessed shock before, many times. But there had been house officers on hand then, to diagnose the outward symptoms, to search out underlying causes—heart damage, broken bones, cerebral injury, ruptured spleens —every type of trauma that could lead to traumatic shock.

She found herself praying as they sped along, that by some miracle, Dr. Shan Malone would be at the hospital

when they arrived. The ambulance pulled in beside a long, low building. Teal Lake Hospital. Tracey caught her breath, as she glimpsed the words, their letters shaped out of wood, white-painted, set against the red brick of the building that was no larger than the tiny clinics that had sprung up in the Portland suburbs to house doctors' offices. She had expected something larger, more impressive. Two stories, at least, with banks of wards . . . Teal Lake had a population of three thousand. Three thousand, one hundred and three, to be precise. She had noticed the numerals on the sign at the outskirts of town as they sped by.

"We'll put him in X-ray." Bull Farrel took command, even before the engine had been turned off. "Sonny's always been spindly. Might as well be sure there's no bones broken." He paused. "God, his face is white." He seemed to really see his son for the first time since he had walked out to him in the middle of the dustry arena. Something like fear muffled the oversized voice.

"He's in shock," Tracey stated. "The sooner we get him inside, the better." She spread a wool blanket, from the ambulance, over Sonny Farrel's limp form as the two men lifted him from the vehicle.

"He's always been spindly–boned," Bull Farrel said. "He had no business trying to ride that outlaw horse."

"The wiry ones like Sonny usually make out all right," the driver said. "If they've got a good saddle under them," he added, leaning forward, under the weight of the stretcher.

Bull Farrel glanced at him. "You accusing me of something, Ray?"

"A boy needs equipment to rodeo," the man said, his voice remaining calm and detached. Tracey realized that he was stating a fact, no more.

"I don't intend for Sonny to rodeo," Bull Farrel said, his roaring voice assuming a note of finality. "Smokey Denton's got no business putting wild ideas like that into his head."

Tracey hurried ahead of the two men as they eased the stretcher through the emergency entrance of the tiny hospital and carried it along a polished corridor. Labeled

doors opened off the immaculate hallway. Dr. Shannon Malone, Medical Director. The words leaped at her from one of the polished mahogany panels. And across from it, a few steps down the corridor, X-ray. Bull Farrel maneuvered the stretcher toward the sign. A white-uniformed nurse, hearing the commotion, emerged from a doorway and hurried toward them.

"We'll want him in emergency first," Tracey said quietly to the big man.

"This way." The nurse, approaching thirty, but pretty still, turned curious dark eyes on Tracey, before she whirled in a rustle of starch to usher them through yet another doorway. "Rodeo victim?" she asked, reaching to smooth the sheet on the narrow high table, not looking up. When she turned to help slide the patient onto the table, immediate recognition flooded her dark eyes. "Why, it's Sonny."

"Do what you can for him, Sylvia," Bull Farrel said.

The nurse glanced at Tracey.

"I'm an R.N.," Tracey told her with a little smile. "If you need me."

"This is Cory Flynn's niece," Bull Farrel said.

"Tracey Talbot." Tracey, guessing that he had forgotten her name, supplied it.

"Shan . . . Dr. Malone should be here shortly," the nurse said. "I think we can manage." She gave Tracey an abstract little smile, her hands, blunt-fingered, efficient looking, already pulling open a drawer in the table, extracting the gray sleeve of a sphygmomanometer.

"I doubt if Sylvia intended to be rude in there," Bull Farrel told Tracey when they stepped out of the emergency room into the corridor. "That girl's all business, when it comes to running Shan's hospital. She'd like to be director of Nursing Services." He paused, giving Tracey a look. "Isn't that what they call it?"

She nodded.

"Except Shan must have figured it wouldn't work out," the big man continued.

"I don't understand," Tracey said.

"Shan and Sylvia were engaged for awhile," he added.

She turned to ask him what had happened, thinking as

they stepped into the hospital's small attractive waiting room that it was none of her business. A man stepped through the doorway, before she could give voice to the question, his appearance driving it from her mind. A little surge of warm, dry outside air accompanied him. Tracey caught the pungent smell of pine and sage, mingled with the leather smell of him, and the unmistakable scent of green soap and iodoform. He paused, towering over her, taller than the bull-chested man by her side.

"Bull," he said. His voice rich and musical.

"It's Sonny, Shan," Bull Farrel told him. "One of those outlaws they've got out at the arena pitched him. Sonny got a little alkali in his craw."

Tracey sensed fear beneath Bull Farrel's booming bravado. The man beside them—Dr. Shannon Malone, she thought, with a little tingle of surprise—reached out a slim hand and clasped the thick-chested man's shoulder, for an instant. "I'll look after him, Bull," he said. He glanced at Tracey. His eyes, she noted, were the same color as shaded creek water—clear, sun-flecked, a golden shade of brown. Or were they green . . . Hazel, the color would read on his driver's license. He wore hip-skimming pants, and a Western shirt fastened at the throat with a neat string tie. His hair, she noted, when he reached to take off his roll-brimmed hat, was dark and close-cropped above a face as tan as any cattle rancher's. He gave her a brief nod, and turned on a booted heel to disappear into the corridor.

"I'm sorry," Bull Farrel said. "I should have introduced you to Shan. I guess I'm a little rattled over Sonny. He's my only kin," he added.

Tracey went to the window and peered through the monk's cloth draperies for some sign of Cory Flynn's Cadillac, and not seeing it, turned to sit opposite Bull Farrel in one of the black and white pony-hide upholstered chairs. The big man, his battered black Stetson resting on a faded knee, reminded her of the proverbial bull in a china shop. She had dealt with anxious relatives before—each of the eager young students at Good Faith Hospital had been required to establish relationships with

relatives of the patients under their care as a routine part of training. Tracey called upon that knowledge now, sensing Bull Farrel's tenseness, his underlying fear for his son's well–being. A comforting smile formed on her soft lips.

"Dr. Shannon Malone looks like quite a capable man," she said, remembering that the majority of patients' relatives she had dealt with had been eager to talk about their doctors; to sing their praises, which seemed to reassure them, whether they were aware of it or not.

"Shan's an O.K. guy," Bull Farrel said. "One of us. I've known him since he was knee–high. I guess none of us around here would trust him with our women and kids if we didn't know he was the best."

"He must be kept busy, being the only M.D. in town."

"There are some that don't come to him," Bull said. "Those that got started with doctors in Klamath Falls, or Medford, before Shan finished Med school."

She gave him a wide-eyed look. Klamath Falls was more than a hundred miles away: Medford farther still. Two hundred miles, or more . . .

"We drive fast cars over here," Bull Farrel answered her question before she could ask it. "Or fly, most of us. More and more, though, the folks around are coming to Shan, since we built the hospital for him. He's got all of the patients he can handle, and then some. He manages, somehow."

"He'd have to have a good staff," Tracey said, dredging up what little bit she knew about small town hospitals.

"He's working on that," Bull Farrel said. "So far, he's got fourteen people working here. Thirteen now," he revised the statement. "Mrs. Morgan, his director of Nursing Services, quit last week. Too old. Her legs gave out on her. He'll have to replace her. And he wants to bring in another doctor. Two, if he can recruit that many. And a good dentist. We've got old Doc Campbell. But he's ready to go out to pasture the minute some new blood turns up."

She wouldn't have thought that a man like Bull Farrel

would take so much interest in the small medical institution. He hardly seemed the type—Barrel-chested, Huge-handed, clumsy, even in the rugged, pony-upholstered chair . . .

"I'm director of the hospital board," he surprised her by saying. "A bunch of us ranchers got together to build this place for Shan—his brothers, myself, Cory. We needed it," he added, his huge voice growing perceptibly softer; his deep-set eyes not quite looking at her. "My wife died on the way to Klamath Falls. I was trying to get her to a doctor. If we'd had this place then, and a man like Shan to run it. . . . Thank God he's here for Sonny, if the kid is really hurt." He resumed his natural booming tones.

"I'm afraid he is, Bull." Dr. Malone appeared in the doorway opposite them, his tan face somber. "He's not responding as well as he should. Blood pressure's going."

"What does that mean, Shan?" Bull Farrel asked.

"He's bleeding somewhere inside," Dr. Malone told the big man. "Hemorrhage, with protracted delay. It's not letting up."

"Traumatic rupture of the spleen," Tracey heard herself saying, half-aloud. She had suspected as much on the ride from the rodeo arena when she had felt Sonny Farrel's sweat-clammed hand, cold in her own, and had sought the weakening pulse in his wrist. Injury to the spleen was common in serious automobile accidents. She had helped handle her share of those.

She was suddenly aware of the dark-haired doctor's intent gaze fastened on her, his gold-flecked eyes sparked with interest. "You aren't old enough to be an M.D.," he said. "That being the case, I'll assume that you're an R.N. One who knows her business."

Tracy felt a hot flush rise to her cheeks.

"This is Cory Flynn's niece," Bull Farrel said. "The one she's been braggin' on all these years. Tracey Talbot." This time the big man remembered her name. "She helped bring Sonny here. Now he's here, Shan, what can you do about that . . . traumaed spleen." He stumbled over the medical term Tracey had uttered.

"With your consent, Bull, I'm going to take it out," Shannon Malone stated, his voice positive, concise. He glanced toward the glassed-in reception office at one end of the watiing room where a woman, neat in a summer cotton, sat typing. "Florence will give you a form to sign. It's customary when the patient is under twenty-one."

The big man moved toward the glassed-in square even before Dr. Malone had finished speaking, his huge hand searching in the breast pocket of his shirt, coming out with a slim ballpoint pen.

Dr. Malone looked at Tracey. "You've scrubbed before for one of these things." It was more statement than question. "I can use you. If you're free," he added before she could speak.

"I am, Doctor," she heard herself saying, contracting her abdominal muscles. He thought that she was experienced. And she was, she reminded herself. Except that she hadn't yet assumed the full responsibility of a scrub nurse without a super, scrubbed and gowned nearby, to bolster her newly-acquired nurse's acumen. There would be no one to coach her in the tiny Teal Lake Hospital, to step in if she found that her skills didn't measure up to the task. She should have told him . . .

"I have an idea you'd have said that, even though your aunt had been beeping the horn of her Cadillac outside that window right now," Dr. Malone was saying, talking to put her at ease in the strange new surroundings, Tracey guessed. "You have the look of dedication about you." He paused, his hazel eyes totally serious. "I couldn't define it for you. But I can recognize it every time. A doctor gets so he's able to do that after awhile." He paused before a closed door, marked "scrub." "Everything you'll need is in there."

She pushed open the door and stepped quickly inside. She realized that she was breathing too fast, panting almost. She swallowed hard, willing her throbbing heart to normal action, taking quick stock of the well-equipped little scrub room. Still more than a little panicky, she snapped open the cuffs on the expensive Western shirt her aunt had bought for her and slipped out of it.

Why had Dr. Malone asked her to scrub? Surely there were nurses . . . At that precise moment the door opened, and a white-uniformed, capped nurse stepped inside. Sylvia West. Tracey drew a quick sigh. Perhaps Dr. Malone had changed his mind . . . She waited for the nurse to speak. Miss West looked at her, something like resentment showing in her brown eyes.

"I . . ." Tracey began, slipping out of the tight riding pants.

"The gowns are in that box," Miss West interrupted her. "You'd better be good," she added, her voice sharp.

"But . . . why me?" Tracey managed, above the first gush of steam, as she pressed the lever above the scrub basin with her elbow. She could have been an imposter, for all that Dr. Shan Malone knew about her. Some silly girl captivated by the idea of playing nurse . . .

"Shan needed someone and you were there," Sylvia West said.

"But surely . . ."

"We do have a surgical nurse and a darn good one," Miss West finished for her. "It happens that she's out of town at the moment. Shan needs someone, now. I'm circulating," she added, before Tracey could ask more questions. "And a dozen other things."

The fear inside of her crystallized. Surgical nurse! That meant that she would be expected to stand beside Dr. Malone; feed the endless rows of gleaming instruments into his quick hands, which she knew from the glimpse she'd had of their slim suppleness would flash like birds in flight, once the actual surgery had begun.

"I could have circulated," Tracey said, above the piercing panic.

"It's been some time since I've done any surgical work." Miss West's voice was studied, precise. "I specialized in administration. Someone has to direct activities." Her voice sounded slightly condescending, as though the nurse doing the actual work were somehow not quite adequate without close supervision.

The little ball of anger that rose in Tracey at the older nurse's tone of voice, broke the dam of fear that had built behind her sternum. A new feeling of determination

surged through her. She applied the nylon brush that she was using on her hands and nails with a spasm of vigor. She would show Miss West, she thought, that Tracey Talbot, R.N., knew her business, without someone watching over her.

3

SOME OF THE fear was back with her when she entered the small operating room fifteen minutes later, wearing one of the wrinkled green gowns from the sterile pack. She had done her share of surgical duty during her student days. Her long-fingered hands had been particularly suited to the intricacies of instrument tables and sponge racks. The head nurse at Good Faith Hospital had recognized her ability; had encouraged Tracey to specialize in surgical nursing. She had spent six months on that particular service.

She wondered now whether or not she would remember all that she had been taught. She remembered the brief bout of nausea that had swirled through her the first time she watched a knife slip into a patient's exposed white flesh. And the faint feeling she had experienced at the sight of the blood that had oozed in tiny, slowly forming beads. The ill-feeling had vanished quickly. And she had never experienced it again, after that first time. She prayed, as she went to an instrument cabinet to assist the green-swathed nurse already in the room, that she would never experience it again.

The nurse glanced at her, a new face. "Hi," she said, her laughing green eyes curious above her mask. "Who are you?" The question was unexpected, abrupt.

"Tracey Talbot," Tracey told her. Then, seeing that the nurse expected more, "Cory Flynn's niece."

"Oh," the nurse said, as though that fact explained everything. "We're short-handed. We always are on Rodeo Day. Doctor called me in from floor duty. Krig's

here, too. Our anesthesiologist," she added. "He's getting the patient ready while Doctor scrubs."

"I understand that Dr. Malone expects quite a great deal from his team," Tracey commented, remembering Miss West's words. *You'd better be good. . . .*

"Doesn't every decent surgeon?" The green-eyed nurse, whose name, she told Tracey, was Rose Calahan, gave her a quick glance. "Just because his hospital is back-of-beyond doesn't mean that he's sloppy in his ways."

Tracey sensed that she had put the nurse on the defensive. "I didn't mean . . ." She groped for words to redeem herself.

"I know." The green eyes smiled again. "You're scared, aren't you?" Rose Calahan said with alarming insight and frankness. "Doctor will know. He knows everything."

The comment did little to allay Tracey's fears as she helped ready the basic abdominal set. A good nurse had to be able to read a doctor's thoughts; to anticipate his needs, even before he made them known to her with a gesture of his hand or a sharply barked order. In the same way, a good doctor had to be discerning of those who worked with him. She had known that. She should have told him that she hadn't worked as a surgical nurse since her training days; that she was a fledgling who hadn't yet tried her wings alone.

The sound of soft rubber tires rolling along the corridor, turning in through the swinging doors, interrupted the thought. She glanced up to see a slim, youngish man bringing in the patient. Seconds later, Dr. Malone, scrubbed and wearing the wrinkled jacket and drawstring trousers that surgeons wear under the voluminous scrub gowns, entered the room, the dark line of his brows drawn together in a little frown as he bent over the patient, palpating the region of the spleen once more—reassuring himself, Tracey thought.

"Cyclopropane, with basal Avertin," he said to the youthful anesthetist. He turned, his hazel eyes scanning the room.

Tracey, busy with the additional hemostats and retrac-

tors they would need to supplement the basic abdominal tray, felt his gaze pause over her, as though he would assess her qualities as a nurse by merely looking at her. A sudden awe of the tall, dark-haired, hazel-eyed doctor grew in her, mingling with the apprehension she felt. She became acutely aware of his presence, as she worked laying out thumb forceps, tissue forceps, Metzenbaum scissors. His murmured consultation with the anesthetist came to her, as the two collaborated in the preparation and administration of the anesthetic. She found herself enjoying the lively tones of his voice with that part of her mind that wasn't involved with the gleaming rows of knives and curved intestinal clamps.

Dr. Malone helped place Sonny Farrel on the pedestaled surgical table, his bare arms virile in the bright light. They arranged the limp body in the dorsal recumbent position, making the splenic area prominent and accessible, by raising the kidney rest over the coastal margin, and tilting the left side of the table upward. Dr. Malone turned to leave the room, scanning the group and their preparations with a quick, penetrating glance. Tracey, her hands busy with knife handles—a No. 10 and 15, a No. 7 blade—felt his gold-tinted gaze pause on her once more. Unexpectedly, a blush flooded her cheeks. She drew a grateful sigh for the mask that shielded her inexplicable frustration.

"You're prettier than West," Rose Calahan drawled through her mask.

Tracey glanced up sharply to see the nurse regarding her with amused green eyes. "He's a man, in addition to being a darned good doctor," Rose added, unnecessarily. Tracey thought, turning back to her instruments.

She found herself wondering about Dr. Malone. Surprisingly, some of the apprehension she had felt had left her, giving way to a sudden intense desire to please him. She willed her trained mind to concentrate on the shimmering instruments, arranging them carefully on the sterile-towel covered stand. Two Gray cystic duct forceps, with teeth. Two Doyen curved intestinal clamps. Two Rochester-Cormalt forceps, eight inches long . . .

They were ready when Dr. Malone entered surgery the

second time, enveloped in a wrinkled gown, his hands held high, his long fingers flexing in tissue-thin gloves. Sylvia West entered with him, her blunt fingers involved with the strings at the back of his sterile surgical covering.

"She won't give up," Rose Calahan whispered, her green eyes knowing above the gauze folds of her mask. "She should have been in here helping us. Not that we needed her."

The anesthetist had his rack of transfusion bottles in their place, their rubber tubes dangling. At a signal from Dr. Malone, they all stepped into place; Rose Calahan moving to handle sponges and dressings, Sylvia West going to prepare the warm saline solution that would be used to drench towels and lap pads and to irrigate the wound. Tracey stepped up beside Dr. Malone. In the wrinkled scrub clothes he seemed huskier than she had imagined and not quite so tall, although he still towered over her five–foot, three–inch frame. His right hand, slender in the fine quality surgical glove, flashed toward her in an abrupt movement.

The scalpel was ready. She slapped it against his palm, breathing an inaudible sigh, realizing that she had been holding her breath, letting it out with a feeling of relief that left her knees weak for a brief second. Reflexes acquired through the long hours spent in the bright bank of operating rooms at Good Faith Hospital during training, snapped into readiness without conscious thought. Her hands moved almost automatically; picking up the next instrument, extending the ribbon retractor he would need even before he had discarded the first instrument with a sharp little clatter.

He had swept the keen edge of the knife across integument that was startlingly white, in contrast to the tanned skin on the patient's extended arms, exposed for insertion of the intravenous needles, the contracting band of the sphygmomanometer. The skin layers parted in a long, left-rectus incision. Clamps for the bleeding vessels, and ligatures. Sylvia West brought the sterile towels, giving them to Tracey, ordering her to place them along the skin edges, in unnecessarily crisp tones.

Tracey didn't miss the quick glance Rose Calahan gave her. The nurse's eyes reflected a cynical amusement.

"Miss Talbot is an R.N.," Dr. Malone muttered beneath his mask. He might have been commenting on some aspect of the surgery. Sylvia West's eyes smoldered suddenly with unconcealed resentment.

That was how it was between those two, Tracey found herself thinking. She had witnessed dissension before between medical personnel. The tension between Dr. Malone and Sylvia West seemed to go beyond the impersonal irritations that invariably came up between people who, by the nature of their profession, must work in close proximity to each other; between doctor and nurse; nurse and technician; doctor and doctor, even. She guessed as much when she saw the charged look Sylvia West gave the green-swathed doctor. She remembered what Bull Farrel had said about the two having once been engaged, and wondered about Dr. Shannon Malone's relationship with the attractive brown-eyed nurse, as she watched him incise the peritoneum, retracting the coastal margin upward.

They were into the crucial part of the surgery now. The stomach and transverse colon were exposed, and the fundus of the stomach retracted toward the mid-line. The slender-fingered, thin-gloved hand reached again as a discarded instrument clattered. Tracey's agile mind had anticipated the move. The knife for the separation of the attachments between the surface of the purplish, bleeding mass that had been a smooth healthy spleen before the outlaw horse at the rodeo had pitched Sonny Farrel into the alkali and the parietal peritoneum, was ready, held at an angle to be slapped against his reaching palm, almost before his hand moved toward her.

The anesthetist—Rose Calahan had told her that his name was Krig Bales—gave his report in a husky muffled voice. Rate and depth of breathing. Rate and strength of pulse. Blood pressure.

"He's holding out," Dr. Malone said with a satisfied little nod, as he reached in to snip free the diaphragmatic attachments.

The pulpy organ was suddenly mobilized, freed to be

lifted by the surgeon's keen hand toward the wound and the mid–line. Tracey drew a quick sharp little breath as the cavity occupied by the spleen opened wide, gruesome-appearing, even to one accustomed to the sight of exposed raw flesh.

"Pack it," Dr. Malone ordered.

At Good Faith Hospital, a doctor-assistant would have been on hand to reach in without an order and pack the vacated body space. She realized, with a little start, that Dr. Malone was speaking to her. She glanced up to see Sylvia West watching her, waiting. She reached for the gauze sponges Rose Calahan had ready, willing her fingers not to tremble as she inserted the first blunt pad.

Another wad of gauze, carefully accounted for by Rose, Tracey knew, so that each soft square could be retrieved. And another. The blood-darkened cavity seemed to have assumed the proportions of a Grand Canyon. She manipulated her sponge forceps, with fingers that wanted to melt, knowing that she couldn't give in to the weak feeling that washed through her, draining the strength from her knees. She locked her knees—a trick she had learned in training—and the feeling passed. She was going to be all right.

She lifted her eyes to see Sylvia West still watching her, almost daring her to crumple beside the high table. She managed a confident little smile before she lowered her gaze again, to watch Dr. Malone sever the upper attachment of the spleen, separate it from the fundus of the stomach and the tail of the pancreas.

She had regained complete control of her trembling knees when he reached for clamps to secure the pedicle. Rose Calahan extended a basin to receive the exploded organ, and they were ready to ligate the vein and the artery; a double ligation to save time.

Closure took mere minutes, Dr. Malone's sure fingers darting with their trail of No. 2 silk suture. He glanced at Tracey when the last suture was in place, his eyes bright with accomplishment. "That should do it," he said, going to check Krig Bale's intricate combinations of tubes and dials for himself, assuring them all that their patient had

endured; that Sonny Farrel would live to ride yet another outlaw.

"If Bull will let him," Krig Bales commented, yanking down his mask to reveal a smooth boyish face.

"I want to apologize for railroading you in here, the way I did," Dr. Malone turned once again to Tracey. "The least I can do is drive you out to the Flying Flynn when we get Sonny settled. Cory will think I've kidnapped you. Not a bad idea at that," he added under his breath, his eyes squinting in an appraising smile when she slipped off her mask.

Sylvia West was watching them. Tracey could feel her dark smoldering gaze. "Cory said she'd pick me up here," she said quietly, feeling a surge of pity for the older nurse. There was something in Miss West's eyes; an unidentifiable expression that she had seen before, in the eyes of the hopelessly ill, she thought, with a little shock. The comparison didn't quite make sense. She brushed it aside, realizing that she was tired. A good kind of tired . . .

"Doctor?" she glanced up to see the woman from the glassed-in reception office—Florence, Dr. Malone had called her—sticking her head tentatively through the doorway, then seeing that they were finished, stepping inside. "Mrs. Flynn left a message for Miss Talbot." The woman turned to Tracey. "You're to call the ranch when you've finished here. Your aunt will send the car in."

"No need for that," Dr. Malone said. "I'm invited to the party, too. We'll get out there as soon as we can."

"Let's get this patient into recovery," Sylvia West said, her words directed toward Rose Calahan and Krig Bales, but, Tracey knew, intended for everyone in the room, Dr. Shan Malone included. The reprimand in her voice was unmistakable.

Dr. Malone moved away from Tracey, seeming not to have heard, his warm gaze concentrated once more on Sonny Farrel, as he reached to test the patient's pulse, bending over the table a little in that half-stooped position that is characteristic of an intent doctor.

After a few seconds, he reached to slide the patient onto the wheeled stretcher Krig Bales had maneuvered

into place beside the high table. He seemed to have forgotten her, as he and Sylvia West walked beside Sonny Farrel into the corridor, the dark–eyed nurse leaning close to him, speaking to him.

"How long are you going to be at the Flying Flynn," Rose Calahan said beside her.

"For the summer," Tracey said.

Rose nodded, a pleased expression filling a face that, Tracey noticed, now that she had shed her mask, was as freckled as a turkey egg. "Long enough to give West a run for her money," the girl commented.

"I hadn't intended to work . . ." Tracey began.

"I didn't mean on the job," Rose said, a mischievous smile crinkling her short nose. "As a lady of leisure, basking at the Flying Flynn, you'll have plenty of time to make yourself glamorous. Not that you need it," the nurse added, her busy hands tossing used sponges onto a "dirty" sheet. "There are plenty of us here who'd like to see Dr. Malone make a clean break."

Tracey looked at the girl, her blue eyes puzzled. "I'm afraid Aunt Cory hasn't kept me posted on local events," she said.

"Sorry," Rose grinned. "I guess an outsider wouldn't know that Sylvia West has been working to capture Dr. Malone for the past two years. It's time someone else stepped into the picture. Someone fresh and new and different. Like you." The pert nurse crinkled her nose.

"Are you hinting that I make a play for your Dr. Malone?" Tracey asked, thinking that she might have been back at Good Faith Hospital, involved in one of the endless romantic intrigues that kept nurses buzzing during spare moments.

"I sure am," Rose said, completely unabashed. "West gave his ring back once, expecting him to hand it over to her again, as meek as a pigmy mouse. So far, Shannon Malone has held out on the second offer. But how long can any man keep ahead of a woman, once she's put her track shoes on? Don't tell me you didn't notice the cleats on West's when Dr. Malone came into the room. Or the way she took off after him when he left it."

Tracey went into the nurse's room without comment

and slipped out of her scrub gown, thinking that the last thing she wanted was to become involved in a romantic triangle. Dr. Shannon Malone was extraordinarily attractive, she had to admit. But, she told herself, she hadn't come to Teal Lake to catch a man. If Sylvia West had first dibs on him, more power to her.

"Aren't you even interested?" Rose had followed her, her green eyes amazed. "A guy like Shannon Malone . . ."

"Not really," Tracey said, giving the nurse a patient smile.

"What West really wants is to run this hospital for Doctor," Rose said. "That's why she gave his ring back the first time. Because he wouldn't fire poor old Mrs. Morgan, and give her the director of Nursing Services job." Rose shook her head, looking at Tracey with wistful eyes. "If only you were a little older. Not that you're lacking in experience. Dr. Malone could put you on as director of nursing. That would cook West's goose, but good. Trouble with West is, that she wanted to be an M.D. herself. I think she's jealous of Dr. Malone."

"You might have a try at Dr. Malone yourself," Tracey said lightly, wishing that Rose Calahan would change the subject. The bout in surgery had tired her more than she had realized. A swim in the big pool at the Flying Flynn sounded inviting.

"Don't think I didn't put my best efforts into it when I first came on duty here," Rose grinned at her. "Only one thing wrong. Dr. Malone remembers my kid days. I was fifteen to his twenty, when he used to go hunting with my older brothers. All of those crazy pop songs about the coltish kid sister turning into a glamour girl overnight and capturing the local hero just aren't true."

Tracy couldn't help laughing at the expression on the young nurse's face.

"You're a looker when you laugh," Rose said, unexpectedly. "Say, you aren't already spoken for, are you?" Her glance flashed to Tracey's ring finger.

Tracey shook her head. "Not yet."

"But you've had offers, so you know how to play the game?"

"I've had offers," Tracey admitted. "An eager intern . . ."

"I've an idea the blessed saints were saving you for Shannon Malone," Rose twinkled. "Promise me you won't fight it."

"I promise," Tracey heard herself saying, amusement tinkling in her voice. She liked Rose Calahan, she decided, slipping slim legs into the trim riding pants. And Dr. Shannon Malone.

4

DR. MALONE was in the waiting room talking to Bull Farrel when she finished dressing. His dark hair stood awry where the surgical cap had teased it, giving him an appealing little boy look. His gold-flecked eyes took on new interest as he glanced up to see her enter. She tried not to notice his warm gaze roving the length of her trim figure, rounded in all of the right places, pleasingly revealed by the fitted Western clothing her aunt had insisted on buying Tracey for her trip to Teal Lake and the Flying Flynn.

"Sonny's going to be all right, then?" Bull Barrel was saying.

Dr. Malone nodded. "He won't be riding outlaws for a week or two," he said, with a reassuring grin. "Other than that, he'll do. He's young and tough."

"He won't be riding outlaws, ever," Bull Farrel exploded, his big voice sounding relieved. "I'll see to that. He wouldn't have been in that arena today, if I'd had anything to say about it. Had his entry fee plunked on the line, time I caught up with him and Smokey, and found out what she'd put Sonny up to."

"That's between you and Sonny, Bull," Dr. Malone said. "And Smokey Denton."

"I'd rather see the kid take up rustling than go to the circuit," Bull Farrel said, stamping into the corridor.

Dr. Malone turned to Tracey. "I doubt if Bull means that," he said. He raised slim fingers to touch her arm. "If you don't mind waiting half a minute, I'll check on Sonny once more before we go."

"Of course not, Doctor." He lifted his hand away, leaving a little warm place on her arm where his fingers had been. She found herself touching the spot, as she watched him disappear into the corridor, leaning forward a little from his lean waist in the manner of a man accustomed to hurrying. Without warning, Rose Calahan's suggestion ran through her mind.

It wouldn't be difficult to fall for Dr. Shannon Malone on the basis of appearance alone, Tracey thought. He was darkly handsome, well built, his body lean and sturdy. Beyond that, he seemed pleasant enough. And there was no doubt in her mind that he was an excellent surgeon—skilled, alert, conscientious. That would count for something, considering her own profession. Sylvia West's interest in him was entirely understandable.

And there was his compact little hospital. Any nurse in her right mind would deem it a pleasure to work on a full time basis in the clean-scented, quiet atmosphere. It was a far cry from the bustling big city hospital where she had taken her training, and where a nurse's nerves could become frazzled in a single night, if there happened to be more than the usual number of emergencies.

He was back beside her in minutes, dressed once more in the slenderizing Western garb—new Levis and snap-button yoked shirt, set off by the string tie. His slide clasp, she noted, was formed in the shape of a strange star. A brand, she realized. He saw her looking at it as he shepherded her out through a back door.

"The Triple M mark," he grinned. "You'll spot it on a few head down in the tip of the valley."

"It's an interesting brand," she commented, seeing that the star was formed by three cleverly joined M's, wanting suddenly to know more about the man beside her. "You're a rancher, too, then?"

"After a fashion," he told her. "Mostly, my two brothers run the ranch. A doctor doesn't have time to chase down too many mavericks. You'll meet Colt and Bras at Cory's party."

He steered her toward a black sports car parked beside a brick cottage. "My town house," he grinned at her, gesturing toward the white-trimmed dwelling. "I stay out at

the ranch when I can. Since that arrangement isn't always practical, the Teal Lake Health Association added a doctor's residence to the hospital holdings."

He helped Tracey into the sleek little car, and climbed in beside her. Seconds later, they were making their way through town, following the main street that was flanked by a new brick courthouse and several substantial looking places of business. Tracey glimpsed a hardware and feed-store, a small market, and a chain dry goods mart. Western items decorated the windows of two clothing stores. A restaurant at the edge of town boasted a real totem pole that looked slightly ludicrous beside the modern plate glass doors. Across the street from the cafe, a rock shop lured tourists with ancient vintage bottles, sun-stained glass shards, and Apache-tears jewelry. Shade trees had been planted along the residential streets at some time in the distant past. Poplars, maples and elms had thrived to cast their sun-dappled shadows against the glare of the prairie that fanned out around the town on three sides.

The rimrock nestled against the eastern flank of the settlement, rising high against the blue sky. It wasn't difficult to imagine the way the back-of-beyond country had been in the early days, when the first settlers had straggled into the expansive upland valley to threaten the ancient Indian holdings. There would have been Indians on the rimrocks then, watching the wagon trains, sending up their ominous smoke signals.

"Eighty wagons were wiped out, just ahead," Dr. Malone said. Tracey jumped, turning to look at him, thinking that the man must be psychic. "Everyone is aware of Indian shades when they first come to Teal Lake," he said, taking his eyes from the endless strip of gray road long enough to smile at her. "It's part of the charm of this semi-desert country. It once was all desert, before we tapped the lake for enough water to raise some alfalfa."

They passed a bronze plaque mounted on an outcropping of lava rock. Tracey glimpsed the word "massacre." She glanced at him expectantly.

"That's where it happened," Dr. Malone said.

They drove on in silence, veering away from the shel-

tering rimrock that jutted up from the smooth valley floor as far as the eye could see, striking off through sage. Bitterbrush . . . Rabbitbrush . . . The chain of mountains that hemmed the valley to the west were visible through blue haze. Stately pines grew on their flanks, the pungent aroma of their needles mingling with the smell of sagebrush to perfume the air for miles.

A puff of dust billowed off to their left, an ochre-colored smudge against the purity of the sky. "Sheep," Dr. Malone said. "Sagebrush Tom and his flock. He avoids rodeos in typical sheepman fashion. But he'll be in town tonight to celebrate with the big money winners."

"What about his sheep? Won't they wander?"

"He's got a good dog. Australian shepherd," Dr. Malone told her.

Another mile, and the gray wooly animals came into view, bunched tightly together. A black and gray brindled dog darted importantly around the outskirts of the small flock, filling the air with a volley of short, sharp barks. An old man, who looked like a Biblical prophet, emerged from the dust cloud, his hair long, white, uncombed; his face smothered in beard the same color and texture. He stooped beneath the weight of a burlap feed bag, that looked as though it were filled with rocks, all of them knobby.

The old man carried a staff, polished to a rich dark sheen from years of use, gripped firmly in a fist as warped as the bulging sack on his back.

Dr. Malone brought the small car to an abrupt halt inches from the clustered sheep, as the woolly animals thronged onto the graveled road, their trim hooves and slim legs incongrous beneath round bodies. "Come on." He opened the car door, laying a warm hand on her arm. "You can't miss this opportunity to meet Tom. He seldom drifts this close to civilization. If you're just visiting with Cory, you might be gone next time he comes to town." He paused, his eyes questioning. "Or are you staying," he added, his expression unmistakably hopeful.

"It's just a visit," she told him.

He helped her from the car, his hand lingering at her elbow as they made their way past the bleating animals.

"Tom!" The itinerant sheepherder rested the sack against a clump of sage to accept Dr. Malone's handclasp. He handled the bag with great care, Tracey noticed, taking pains to balance it so it wouldn't topple.

She studied the bulging burlap, her blue eyes frankly curious. It had seemed too light to contain rocks, she mused. It was possible that it held the old man's gear, except that the most battered of skillets could hardly be that bumpy and irregular.

"Sagewood carvings," Dr. Malone had seen her curious glance. He introduced her to the ancient herder, who seemed to have no last name. "Sagebrush Tom," Dr. Malone said simply. "He supplies the rock shop in town with objet d'art."

"Just a little whittlin' foolishness," the old man said. "They's some pummy rock in the lot this time. And a couple of obsidian arrowheads I found out at White Maiden Spring." He hesitated, his piercing blue eyes set deep in sockets that were the same tone and texture as saddle leather, regarded Tracey with unblinking solicitude. "You like to see what I've got in that sack, lady?" he said, finally, apparently satisfied with what he saw. Even before she nodded assent, the gnarled hands were fumbling with the bit of grimy twine wrapped around the mouth of the bag.

Tracey emitted a little sigh at the intricate loveliness of the carved figurines he extracted from its dusty folds. Tom's face became amazingly transformed as he lifted the carving free.

"Law," he said. "I'd give anything to see her again. Only once in the last five years. But I don't forget how she looked." He held the carving toward Tracey, handling it as gently as a man with his firstborn.

The girl was real, then, Tracey thought. Someone the old man had known. His daughter, perhaps . . .

"The White Maiden," Dr. Malone said. "The girl the spring is named for. She died out there the same year the wagon train was massacred. According to the legend, she and her fiancé managed to slip from the wagons. They

made it to the spring and camped there. A couple of painted braves tracked them; came onto the girl while her fiancé was off looking for firewood. He came back and found her. What was left of her," he added. "He buried her there near the spring."

"I reckon she gets mighty lonesome out there sometimes," the old sheepherder said.

Tracey glanced at Dr. Malone, alarm spiraling through her. "But . . . the massacre happened in 1849," she heard herself saying in astonished tones.

"In the fall of the year," Dr. Malone told her.

"She don't come no other time," the old man said. "That's when I seen her. October, it was, when the mists was starting to rise from the meadows around the spring. She come right up to me last time. Law, I thought she had a mind to lay her hand on my brow."

"A few other folks around have seen the White Maiden," Dr. Malone stated, reaching to take the carving from Tracey; to stroke its mellowed smoothness with supple fingers.

"You?" she asked, a strange tingling of alarm, mingled with a nameless excitement chilling her, in spite of the July sun.

"I've never been that lucky," Dr. Malone said. "I'll have to settle for viewing Tom's likeness."

She glanced again at the weird old man. The fire-blue eyes peering from beneath the shag of hair caught and held her own. "I'd judge she's about your age," he said. "Ceptin' she don't wear britches. White, her clothes is. All white. They say the massacre come on her weddin' night. There was fiddlin' and dancin' around the campfire. It made it easy for them Injuns to slip down the crevices of the rimrock and creep up on the wagons." The old man's far-reaching gaze sought the long ridge of rock beyond the small town. The gnarled hands gripped the staff, until the knuckles showed white through creased, leathery skin.

Tracey turned to Dr. Malone, alarm surging through her. He gave her a reassuring smile, handing back the carving. She noted the little figure's dress; the long, billowing, old–fashioned gown that swelled out from the

tiny, sagewood waist, each crease and fold carefully fashioned by the old man's knife; the high-piled, dated hair style that was adorned with a minute wreath of flowers, executed with unbelievable precision.

"Do you like it?" Dr. Malone was asking.

She nodded, realizing that her palms were cold . . . and that she was being terribly foolish. Oregon's mountains and back country were full of queer old hermits, she reminded herself, remembering a bearded old man, not unlike Sagebrush Tom, who kept a lonely vigil at Indian Polly Bridge, not too many miles from Portland. She had gone there once to picnic with one of the interns from Good Faith Hospital. The man at the bridge had offered to take them on a tour along the rugged river—for a price. He had regaled them with bloody tales of Indian battles every step of the way. "Earning his money," her escort had commented.

She glanced at the white-haired, blue-eyed old man before her, telling herself that Sagebrush Tom was doing the same thing—inventing a fancy tale to make his exquisitely carved sagewood items more salable. And Dr. Malone had humored him, out of sympathy. It had to be that way. There were no such things as ghosts . . .

Dr. Malone was taking his billfold from the hip pocket of his Levis, peeling off green bills, handing them to the old man. Sagebrush Tom hesitated, his blue eyes going to the small figure almost longingly.

"I kinda hate to part with her, Doc," he said.

Holding out for more money, Tracey thought. Warmth came back into her hands, and she was aware once more of the July sun, falling low in the west, but warm still: the restless bleating sheep that kicked up a new cloud of dust on the far side of the lonesome road, as the dog barked around them urging them on toward town. She could make out in the distance the tall poplars that grew around the ranchhouse at the Flying Flynn, set low against the blue line of the mountains. The sun glinted on the windshields of long dust cars parked in narrow patches of shade.

"Twenty dollars, Tom?" Dr. Malone was asking. "It seems a fair price."

Tracey caught her breath. She couldn't accept a gift that costly from a man she had met only hours ago—a stranger. She started to protest.

"It ain't the money, Doc," the sheepherder said, before she could open her mouth to speak. "I hadn't counted on lettin' that particular piece go. I kinda wanted to show it to her when she comes around again. Maybe if she likes it, she might speak to me. She ain't never spoke before."

Dr. Malone turned to Tracey. "He's got other things in the bag, if you want to look."

"Something not quite so expensive," she said. The old man's reluctance puzzled her. He had behaved as though he really believed there was a White Maiden . . .

Tom's face brightened perceptibly, as she handed the carving back to him. "A little sage hen, maybe, to set on your dresser," he said, opening the mouth of the bag wide, taking out more figures done in the same fleck-grained, pale-colored sagewood.

She selected a small carving of a sage grouse, his chest puffed with courting, each of his spiked tail feathers executed with precision. And a sage hen "To go with the cock," as Dr. Malone said when she started to protest. She accepted his gift—he had given Tom five dollars for the two small carvings—cradling the palm-sized pair in her hand as they made their way through the rabbitbrush that grew along the edge of the road.

She turned to thank him as he climbed into the bucket seat beside her, closing the door of the little car.

He gave her a look, his eyes bright with sun flecks. "I had an urge to buy a pretty girl a gift," he said, his voice sounding pleased. "It was a fine feeling. I should thank you for being so conveniently present."

Sylvia West's words hummed suddenly through her mind. *Shan needed someone, and you were there* . . . She found herself wondering, as he nosed the high-powered car toward the Flying Flynn Ranch, if the man beside her had a habit of following his urges with every girl who passed his way. It would be interesting to discover what kind of person Dr. Shannon Malone might be, she thought again, if for no other reason than to satisfy her curiosity.

5

THE SPACIOUS grounds surrounding the Flying Flynn ranch house made a green oasis in the surrounding cattle country. Vast lawns, teased to lush greenness by an Indian gardener—a descendant of one of those same Indians who had massacred the wagon train, and murdered the White Maiden, Tracey couldn't help thinking—exuded a fragrant moist coolness. Guests clustered in the shade of the big poplars or beneath the boughs of a luxurious weeping willow that sighed over the tall houses, its trunk grown to mammoth proportions, warped and gnarled with age.

The post-rodeo celebrants splashed in the big pool behind the house or basked on the sheltered patio that bordered it. The pool, Dr. Malone told Tracey, was a real luxury, the only one in the huge upland valley. Water had been piped at great expense from a spring that bubbled in the distant mountains, to supply household needs, fill the pool, and send sparkling jets across the green lawns. Beyond the copious greenery of the oasis, grazing lands parched in the late summer sun—hot, dry, surrounded by expanses of sagebrush, greasewood and the gray-foliaged, yellow-flowered rabbitbrush that crept in where the sage had been destroyed by flash prairie fires.

Dr. Malone parked his sleek car beside a long-nosed Cadillac, and hurried around to open the door for Tracey. Before she could climb out of the low bucket seat, a man separated himself from a group nearby and came to stoop over the small car, peering in at her.

She glanced up at him, catching her breath, totally un-

prepared for the turquoise eyes that flashed beneath crow's-wing hair, glistening in the evening sunlight when he doffed his wide brimmed hat. His skin gleamed like polished mahogany. He smiled to reveal the whitest teeth she had ever seen. He glanced at Dr. Malone.

"No wonder you took your time getting here, Shan," he said.

She noticed that he was younger than Dr. Shannon Malone. Not more than twenty-two or twenty-three. Her own age, she thought. Dr. Malone laid an affectionate hand on the man's shoulder.

"Tracey Talbot, meet Colt," he said, "my younger brother."

She swallowed her surprise and managed a quick smile, a warm handclasp when he reached for her slim fingers. Colt Malone helped her from the car, with hands that were blunt and calloused. When he stretched to his full height, she saw that he wasn't quite so tall as Dr. Malone, and that his body was huskier.

"How's Sonny?" he asked.

"He'll live to ride again," Dr. Malone told him.

Colt Malone hadn't been at the rodeo, Tracey thought. If he had been there, she would have noticed him. He was that kind of man. He turned back to her, smiling, his eyes bright, his teeth dazzling.

"I'd have tamed that outlaw that threw Sonny Farrel," he said confidently, "if I'd been there. My favorite mare decided to foal this afternoon. I couldn't leave Lady," he added.

"Speaking of foals, Shan, what did Sue Ann drop this time?" Tracey looked up to see her aunt hurrying toward them, slim in her tan–colored saddle pants and embroidered shirt.

"Give her time, Cory." Dr. Malone gave Cory Flynn a patient smile.

"The Flannery's weren't at the rodeo," Cory said. "I thought . . ."

"I asked Con not to jounce Sue Ann across our rough roads during her last month," Dr. Malone said. "I had to run out to the Shultz place today."

"Oh?" Cory Flynn said expectantly.

"I went in my capacity as a rancher," Dr. Malone said. "The Shultz livestock has been trespassing."

"I wanted to go," Colt said.

"If you had, there'd have been trouble," Dr. Malone stated.

"Someone ought to run those Shultz's out of the valley before they starve to death." Colt Malone's eyes flashed, twin chips of skim ice in his dark face. "It would be a kindness."

Dr. Malone turned to Tracey. "Local problems," he said, with an apologetic smile. "The Shultz family bought a place that had been vacant for years. A shack and forty acres of sagebrush. They're trying to build a little spread out of it."

"A handful of cows as skinny as that half-starved little kid of theirs," Cole said, no sympathy in his voice. "And as many sheep. Dumb, noisy critters."

Dr. Malone took Tracey's arm. "It's a pathetic situation," he said. "Gus Shultz is a shell-shock victim from the last war. Four or five nervous breakdowns behind him. They came here hoping the wide open spaces would do him good." He paused. "And you came here to enjoy a vacation, not to listen to local tales of woe. I'm sorry." His face lighted in a contrite smile. She noticed that his teeth were perfect. White. Not as dazzling as Colt's, but wholesome. "You brought a swim suit, of course," he was saying.

"If she didn't, I have one that will fit her," Cory Flynn said.

"See you at the pool," Colt grinned at her, over Dr. Malone's shoulder. He turned, a husky, handsome man in Levi's and Western shirt, to hurry in his heeled boots toward the bathhouse at one end of the inviting oblong of water.

"We can both use a swim after that stint in surgery," Dr. Malone said.

Cory Flynn took Tracey's arm in an easy gesture, guiding her toward the big house, stopping, as they progressed, to introduce her niece to her guests. She would never remember all of their names, Tracey thought, skip-

ping a little to keep pace with her energetic aunt. She voiced the doubt.

"Give yourself time, honey," Corey said. In the next instant, she glimpsed the carvings Tracey still carried in her hand, and asked about them.

"Dr. Malone bought them for me," Tracey explained. "From an old sheepherder we met . . ."

"Tom," Cory said, looking, Tracey thought, mysteriously smug and pleased.

She ran up the stairs to her room, feeling glad that she had come to the Flying Flynn Ranch. The people in the big upland valley were easy to like—pleasant, relaxed . . . and handsome. She smiled, thinking of the Malones. Dr. Shan Malone. And Colt . . .

The tempting aroma of barbecuing beef greeted her as she stepped out through the old-fashioned screen door onto the wide veranda that ran around three sides of the big house. There had been a new red swimsuit laid out on her bed when she entered the powder-blue room Cory had decorated especially for her coming. Tracey had slipped into the fashionable latex garment, gratefully. Her own suit was worn and faded by too many years in the sun. And the group around the pool looked surprisingly chic in colorful togs that were the best money could buy. Like everything else the easy-going ranchers owned, she thought—the big cars, silver-winged plane, the blooded livestock.

She stepped off the veranda onto the patio that flanked the back of the house, her eyes searching the splashing group for the Malones. She spotted Colt, his body as brown as his face, frolicking near the end of the pool with a girl who looked vaguely familiar. The two climbed out of the water and sat, legs dangling. The girl jerked off her rubber swim cap and shook out a cloud of silver-colored hair, letting it drift airily around her wet shoulders. The girl from the rodeo—the trick rider who had ridden into the arena, as they carried Sonny Farrel away . . . Smokey Denton, her name was.

Smokey Denton leaned close to Colt Malone, whispering into his ear, resting her wet shoulder against his, to laugh at what she had said. They made a striking pair,

the mahogany-toned, black-haired rancher, and the white-skinned, silvery-haired girl. Tracey noticed several people in and around the pool admiring them, some of the younger women with envy gleaming openly in their eyes.

The touch of a hand on her shoulder caused her to jump a little. She glanced up into Dr. Shan Malone's gold-flecked eyes. "They make an attractive twosome," she gave voice to the thought that had been in her mind, for want of something better to say.

Dr. Malone nodded without comment. "There's someone over here I want you to meet, then we can have that swim," he said, steering her across the patio, beneath opulent green leaves laced through a filagree of redwood slats that formed a shelter over the rosy flagstones. She recognized the big man Dr. Malone guided her toward, before they reached him. Another Malone, she thought. There was no mistaking the family resemblance—the good tan skin and the bold features.

"Bras," Dr. Malone said, simply. "My older brother."

The man before her must once have looked like Colt. Shorter than Dr. Shannon Malone, heavy-bodied, now that he had reached his middle years, his heavy thatch of hair had silvered at the temples. A network of squint lines hemmed in his bright eyes that were the same intense shade as Colt's. Dr. Malone introduced the short, graying woman beside him.

"Bras's wife, Sophie. The most patient woman in the world." He grinned, reaching to pat the smiling woman on a plump shoulder.

Tracey liked Sophie Malone at once, thinking that she looked motherly, comfortable.

"You two had better hurry if you intend to get wet," Sophie said. "Cory's promised to feed us promptly at seven." She glanced past them. "Here comes Colt." A faint shadow that Tracey identified as concern seemed to come into his eyes—blue eyes, Tracey noted. Ordinary, compared to the fiery vividness of her husband's and Colt Malone's quick gaze.

"I've been waiting for you," Colt said to Tracey, reaching past Dr. Malone to take her arm.

"I'd say the waiting hasn't been too painful," Dr. Malone commented, glancing at Smokey Denton, who still sat beside the pool, watching Colt across a smooth white shoulder. Tracey received an impression of gray eyes, the same silvery shade as her floating hair, smoldering like molten lead in a face that was too pale for the Oregon desert sunshine.

Colt dragged her to the pool, before she could protest, and slipped over the edge, pulling her after him, with a burst of laugher. When she came up sputtering she saw that Dr. Malone had gone to sit beside Smokey Denton. He leaned his dark head toward the girl, intent on her pretty face, as she psoke.

"You're the prettiest girl here, even with your hair wet," Colt was saying, his eyes laughing in his dark face. "Cory will be serving up that beef in a few minutes. How about sitting with me?"

She hesitated, thinking that he was a deliberate flatterer; that both of the younger Malone brothers were. He put his hands on her shoulders—hands that felt burly, after Dr. Malone's fine-fingered touch—threatening to dunk her again, if she refused. "Come on," he begged, his face laughing above her own.

"All right," she heard herself saying, thinking that he was terribly handsome—better looking than any of the interns or house officers she had dated at Good Faith Hospital. Better looking, she thought, in a rough, burly way, than his brother, Dr. Shannon Malone. She remembered the carvings Dr. Malone had bought for her, and felt a pang of guilt. It vanished, when she glanced up to see Dr. Malone leading Smokey Denton away, a long, strong-looking arm resting lightly across her bare shoulders.

Rose Calahan's suggestion that she set her own pert nurse's cap for Dr. Malone flitted through her mind. If appearances meant anything, she decided, Sylvia West already had competition. She let Colt lead her away from the pool into the big house.

"You'll want to change back to your saddle duds for dinner," he said to her. "We'll be hitting the trail as soon as everyone has had their fill."

"Hitting the trail?"

"Didn't Cory tell you? A moonlight trail ride is the custom around here, after a good feed." Colt released her hand, letting her run up the flight of stairs to her room to change.

"I haven't been here that long," she called down to him, alluring in the new suit—red was becoming to her dark hair—her smooth, blushing cheeks. She was aware of Colt's bright gaze following her, until she disappeared through a doorway halfway down the bannistered landing.

She was nearly dressed when someone tapped on her door. Cory Flynn stepped inside in response to her call. "I'm teaming you with Shan for dinner," Cory said, reaching to straighten the Western hat Tracey was in the process of balancing on her dark curls.

"But I've already promised Colt," Tracey said.

She didn't miss the little crease of displeasure that joined the weather lines on Cory Flynn's forehead. "I'd hoped you'd like Shan," Cory admitted. "The two of you have a great deal in common, with your medicine." She paused, giving Tracey a tender smile. "There will be another time, dear," she said quietly. The smile flitted away, and her brown creased face became suddenly serious beneath the little ruff of graying blonde hair that fringed her forehead. "In the meantime, don't let Colt Malone turn your pretty head." She whirled away, with the quick, birdlike movement typical of a small woman, to return to her guests waiting below.

They dined at picnic tables scattered beneath the trees beyond the pool. Cory had hired a Western band to entertain her guests while they enjoyed the thick, juice-oozing slices of beef that were carved and served by several of the Levi-trousered men, who had removed their Stetsons to don chefs' caps and aprons.

"The Texas Teasers," Colt said, of the dance band. "They'll hang around until after the trail ride, in case anyone feels like dancing. These parties of Cory's last until the wee hours."

Tracey sat beside the handsome rancher, aware of the pure animal magnetism radiated by his healthy body.

Aware, too, of the envious glances cast her way by some of the female guests—the pixie-nosed blond girl who had been rodeo queen, and Smokey Denton, who sat beside Dr. Malone at the next table. The silver-haired girl had changed to a white, sequin-trimmed riding outfit that hugged her shapely body, showing off each rounded curve.

"Cory told around that you're an R.N.," Colt Malone was saying. "A real pill pusher."

She nodded, a sudden flush of pride warming her to the tips of her toes—pill pusher, needle jockey, nurse. It was a good profession, no matter the phrasing, she thought.

"You and my big brother," Colt said, a patient smile seaming his leather-toned face. "What is it with you two?"

She paused, her fork balanced halfway to her mouth. He had caught her off guard with his puzzled question. What was it that had influenced her to go into nursing? Now that she was here at the Flying Flynn Ranch, enjoying the opulence of her aunt's big country home, reasons seemed to evade her. She had never been called upon before to try to explain her fascination with nursing. Her willingness to study to work hard to become a full-ranking member of her chosen profession had been enough. It hadn't occurred to her that there were people who wondered about doctors and nurses. Her mind flitted, seeking the right words.

"I don't know about your brother, Shan." The name sounded strange on her lips. Forbidden, almost. She had never addressed a doctor by his given name. "But I like people," she continued, after a little pause. She realized, as she said it, that it was true. She did like people—her aunt, the big, wondering rancher beside her, the old sheepherder, in spite of his strangeness. Even Sylvia West . . . and Dr. Shannon Malone.

"Lots of folks like people," Colt Malone said, not understanding. "In fact, I find myself liking you tremendously, at this precise moment. But that doesn't make me want to give you a pill, or take out my knife and cut into your pretty, soft middle." His blue eyes glittered

strangely. Wickedly, she thought, responding with a little shiver. "I know a better way to demonstrate my liking." His voice changed to a low purr. His turquoise eyes held her own long enough for her to see flecks of brightness sparkling in their faceted depths. Ice blue. Not like the golden glow that lighted Dr. Malone's hazel eyes, she thought crazily. "Tonight, on the trail. There will be a moon . . ."

"Tracey." The voice, cool, calm, cut across Colt Malone's melting tones. She glanced up to see Dr. Malone coming toward her, her aunt beside him.

"There's been an accident," Cory Flynn told her, keeping her voice low, to avoid alarming her guests.

Tracey turned away from Colt's glittering gaze, grateful for the interruption, her eyes seeking Dr. Malone's. She knew, even before he spoke, that something terrible had happened. His lean, tan face had set in the firm, faraway look that she had seen on other doctors' faces countless times, indicating that his thoughts had gone ahead to the scene of the accident, determining needs, assessing the facilities he had to cope with whatever it was that had happened.

"Five kids in a car," he said, reaching for her hand. "It collided with one of the stock company trucks. The outfit that provided the saddle broncs and steers for the rodeo."

"For God's sake, Shan. Tracey's here on vacation," Colt said.

"They're badly hurt." Dr. Malone seemed not to have heard his younger brother, as he directed Tracey between tables.

"I brought this down when the call came." Cory Flynn handed her the new tooled-leather nurse's bag. "Everything is all right, folks." She heard Cory's commanding voice raised behind them, silencing the buzz of speculation that their sudden departure had stimulated among the guests. "Dr. Malone has had a call. And, as you know, my niece is a registered nurse. She wanted to see how cases are handled here."

Tracey didn't miss the note of pride in Cory Flynn's voice.

"Two of the kids are still trapped inside of the car,"

Dr. Malone said, beside her. "Sylvia . . . Miss West is sending the ambulance out for the other two." He helped her into the small car, ran around to get himself, and start the engine. It sprang ahead with a fierce roar.

"What about the fifth?" she asked, thinking that at least one of them hadn't been hurt; had managed to escape the wreckage and call for help.

"Dead." Dr. Malone's words clipped through the thought, shattering it.

She sat silent beside him, the full impact of the word turning her blood to ice. She had helped care for accident victims at Good Faith Hospital when they had been brought in, battered and bleeding. But she had yet to assist at the scene of an accident; to be the first to cope with monstrous, seeping gashes—spurting blood—broken bones. Always, the victims had come to her their wounds staunched by the white-coated intern whose turn it happened to be to ride the ambulance, the reassuring dressings in place. Somehow, those neat squares, bloodsoaked though they often were, had smothered the horror of automobile and factory accidents that yielded bleeding bodies to be sutured and bandaged; the fires that resulted in blistered flesh to be laved with soothing ointments and dressings. Twisted metal, shattered glass, scorched timbers had no place in the neat, efficient hospital emergency rooms.

She sat, frightened, as they spun along the graveled road, taking a left turn, after minutes of gripping silence, onto the paved road that connected Teal Lake with Klamath Falls and the rest of the world. A nurse had a right to feel fear, she reasoned with herself. But not to show it.

Dr. Malone needed her. And she was committed not to let him down or any other doctor. She straightened her shoulders against the back of the bucket seat, her eyes straining against the falling dusk, searching for the bright flares that would indicate there had been an accident ahead.

"There." She spotted a tiny red eye far down the long stretch of road. She watched the dancing point of light grow larger, gripping her nurse's bag with both hands.

Something warm brushed against her cold skin. The

sensitive fingers of Dr. Malone's right hand closed over her own.

"It won't always be this way," he said softly.

A second later his hand was gone. Only the warm blood pumping with new determination through her veins attested to its having been there at all, in close communication with the fear that had gripped her, driving it out, filling her with renewed strength and confidence.

6

DARK FIGURES moved across the road ahead, painted orange by the red lights. Some of the shapes, she noted, were animal. Dr. Malone had mentioned a stock truck. . . .

Seconds later, the black car hummed to a stop beside the trembling bulk of a huge trailer truck that blocked the road. The bellowing of frightened cattle all but blotted out the sound of voices beyond the transport. A policeman, seeing their headlights, hurried around the rear of the oversized vehicle, waving a light before him in a futile effort to drive back the night. It was, Tracey thought, that time of evening interspersed between dusk and total darkness, when nothing seemed distinct, even the glow of headlamps.

"I'm Dr. Malone." He reached for her elbow, dragging her close.

"No place for a woman," the patrolman said.

"Miss Talbot is my nurse," Dr. Malone told him.

The blue-uniformed man nodded in a distracted manner. "It's pretty bad." He directed the beam of light around the truck.

It was another five hundred feet down the highway to the wrecked car. She could hear a girl crying, as they ran toward it, Dr. Malone's firm grip never leaving her arm, unwavering in its sure strength. She hurried her own steps to keep pace with his long-legged jog, thankful for the comforting pressure of his fingers, when she glimpsed the first of the victims, blanket-covered, lying beside the road.

"The hearse is coming for that one," the policeman said, the tone of his voice belying the stark harshness of his words.

Another victim lay nearby, on the still-warm macadam road. A boy, Tracey noted, his hair matted, blood–soaked, his face gleaming white through red stains. "That one was thrown free," one of the officers said.

Dr. Malone released her arm to kneel beside the boy, his sure fingers tender, as he made a quick precursive examination to determine the patient's immediate condition. She reached to assist, feeling for the radial artery in the victim's right wrist, holding her breath until she found it.

"His leg is broken," Dr. Malone murmured, "in several places."

The truck roared into sudden motion, down the road from the wreckage. Somewhere a cow bawled. "The tailgates sprung open from the impact." One of the state troopers gestured with his light. "Some of the rodeo stock got loose. The truck driver didn't get so much as a scratch."

"Thank God," Dr. Malone said. "There's the ambulance now."

She glanced up to see the red light blinking toward them, pulling around the truck, that had been moved out of its path. The siren was silent. There was no need for it on the long, straight stretch of highway that was mercifully deserted. No doubt everyone and anyone who might have been using it was at her aunt's party. All but the five youngsters who had been in the car . . .

The ambulance slid to a silent halt beside them, and Krig Bales stepped out, almost before it had stopped rolling, his white jacket and trousers bright in the glow of headlamps. He moved, without speaking to take a litter from the back. "A splint, too, Krig," Dr. Malone said.

They bound the metal support into place, to hold the shattered leg rigid. Tracey realized that the sounds made by the weeping girl had stopped. Dr. Malone arose, clutching his bag as he ran toward the wreckage, where two policemen worked, prying with tire irons, the little

jabs of metallic sound harsh in the immense Oregon night.

The girl who had been crying lay in the rear of the crushed vehicle. "I don't think she's hurt too bad," one of the officers said. "These two," he indicated crumpled forms in the mangled front half of the car, "and the two that were thrown free got the worst of it."

The top of the car looked as though it had been sheared off by some monstrous pair of scissors. Shattered glass, spattered blood, lay everywhere. The girl's soft cheeks, Tracey noted, as Dr. Malone and one of the officers eased her free from the wreckage, had been blasted by tiny glistening shards. Her eyes were closed. If only none of the glass had penetrated them . . . Tracey reached to help place her on the stretcher, feeling at the same time for her pulse. Shock, she thought, noting its faint, too–fast beat.

"I'll get these two to the hospital, Shan," Krig said. "You going this trip?"

"Not yet," Dr. Malone said. "Tell Sylvia to get started. Set up in surgery. She'll know what to do."

The two officers had pried the door free by the time they got the girl into the ambulance. Tracey caught her breath, as the beam from one of the bright lights carried by the officers glanced across the mangled shapes inside.

"Looks like more D.O.A.'s," one of the troopers said.

"I'm . . . still alive." The boy under the steering wheel had heard, and tried to separate himself from the tangled metal.

"Easy, son," Dr. Malone stretched his long arms into the smashed car. "Let us do the moving for you."

"Letty," the boy said. "She's dead, ain't she."

His lacerated face came into Tracey's line of vision.

"We don't know yet, son," Dr. Malone said, manipulating the hurt body carefully, easing out a leg . . . another . . . and finally, the boy's torso, blood–soaked. Gruesome, even to a nurse, Tracey thought, with some remote part of her mind, steeling herself as she reached to help with the limp arms.

Her hand clasped something warm and throbbing. A wet viscousness flushed her hand in frightening rhythm.

An artery severed . . . Her alert nurse's mind diagnosed the injury. Almost automatically, her fingers sought the pressure point on the inside of the boy's upper arm. The brachial—her keen mind put a name to the deep throbbing vessel.

Direct pressure over the wound area, next. She fumbled in her bag for a compress, found one, reached to hold it in place while Dr. Malone, assisted by one of the officers, lifted the boy's limp body free of the wreckage. Someone—one of the patrolmen—had spread a gray blanket on the flat, hard roadbed. They placed the patient on it, and the officer held a light while she sponged the area of the arm wound with the compress, using the moisture of the blood as a cleansing agent to remove every trace of dirt and shattered glass.

She reapplied pressure, holding the arm in a raised position, for want of a pillow, watching as Dr. Malone checked other bleeding parts for hemorrhage.

"We've got this one free." The officers brought another body to place beside the boy. A long straggle of blond hair hung free, crumpling into a little mass of gold against the black pavement, when the men laid the girl down.

A horrible, bluish knob seemed to pulsate on the child's forehead (the girl was no more than fourteen) above a face as white as death. Tracey reached for the limp wrist with her free hand. "Alive." She breathed the magic word aloud, at the first hint of feeble life beneath her sensitive fingers.

Dr. Malone nodded, his dark head still bent over the boy. "We'll do an agglutination on this one and start dextran," he said, thinking ahead, Tracey knew, to the hospital, issuing the order now to save time later. An agglutination was a simple test to make. She would have no trouble obtaining the necessary drops of blood, to be mingled with an equal amount of dextran on a white plate. If the blood curdled and clumped—agglutinated—that would indicate that the boy's blood and the dextran were incompatible; that it would kill him if they transfused the pale, white-yellow liquid into his veins. They would have to locate a donor immediately, if that happened. Cross match . . .

"Concussion." Dr. Malone murmured. He had turned his attention to the blond girl. Letty, the boy had called her.

The blond hair convulsed against the black pavement, a pale, slithering stream, as the girl's knees jerked suddenly to her chest. She vomited. Dr. Malone's strong arms turned her, held her until the spasm had passed.

"Is she . . . ?"

"Still unconscious," Dr. Malone said, before Tracey could finish.

They waited for the ambulance to return, doing what they could for the two lying on the hard roadbed. The girl was violently ill a second time. Dr. Malone hovered over her to keep her from strangling.

"It may be a skull fracture," he said, keeping his voice low to avoid alarming the white faced boy.

She stayed beside her patient, compressing the brachial artery, holding a gauze pad snugly over the wound in his lower arm, keeping the member elevated. He couldn't afford to lose more blood. Already, she noted, he was in shock: the type of shock that manifested itself with an unusual restlessness. His head rolled from side to side, his pupils dilated, reflecting light from the truck's headlamps and the officer's flashlights, in the same manner that an alarmed animal's eyes glow at night. He complained of thirst. One of the troopers went to a patrol car and returned with a thermos.

"Coffee," he said.

"Good," Dr. Malone said. "Enough to dampen his throat. No more until I've had a chance to examine him more thoroughly."

The officer poured a little of the strong, fragrant brew into the screw-on cap, and seeing that Tracey's hands were occupied, knelt to tip up his head to let him swallow. Krig Bales seemed to be taking an eternity, Tracey thought, glancing at her watch, seeing that only a few minutes had passed since the anesthetist had left with the ambulance. She glanced up to see the truck driver approaching, looking wan in the hollow circles of light, his hand trembling as he reached to light a cigarette.

"I didn't know they were there, until I saw the lights

right on top of me," he said to no one in particular. "I was turning off the highway, onto that little dirt road back there. Goes to the Circle J. Bud Jenks is a friend of mine. He'd asked me to spend the night."

Tracey had been too busy to notice the small side road that was no more than a pale thread winding through the black clumps of sage and bitterbrush. Somewhere, far off, a coyote howled. The sound sent a little shiver down her spine.

"They were going too fast. Way too fast," the truck driver continued, after the eerie noise had faded. "There wasn't a chance they could have stopped. Not a chance. Their car went right under the truck trailer. The span between the wheels was broad enough. But not high enough. Thank God they weren't in a convertible. It would have sheared their heads off . . ."

"There's no chance of rounding up that stock tonight," an officer said, changing the subject abruptly.

"I'm missing a couple of broncs and some brahmas," the driver said, turning away, going with the trooper back to the truck.

The boy beside Tracey groaned. She spoke soothing words to him, wishing again that Krig Bales would hurry. Dr. Malone was still working over the girl, laying his ear against her chest. Then, suddenly, he straddled her slight form, pumping her chest with his slim, strong hands. Respiratory failure. It happened, sometimes, in shock—or with ahead injury. A temporary paralysis . . .

"Letty." The boy sensed Dr. Malone's movements beyond his range of vision.

"She'll be all right," Tracey said, trying to convince herself as well as the boy.

She glanced into the darkness, beyond the shell of light, looking for the blinking red eyes that would indicate the return of the ambulance. And saw it, still far off, but unmistakable. Minutes later, the long vehicle pulled up beside them. The officers were reaching inside for the stretchers, almost before it had stopped.

Tracey glanced at Dr. Malone. He was no longer laboring over the girl. Her breath caught in her throat, her eyes seeking his for reassurance. He gave her a quick lit-

tle nod. "She's breathing again," he said, sliding his arms under the childish body, helping Krig get her into the ambulance.

The headlights swept across the wreckage, as Krig Bales turned the ambulance around. Tracey, crouching in the back beside her patient, aware of Dr. Malone's long, sturdy body jackknifed into the narrow space beside her own, glimpsed twisted metal, the bloodstained upholstery, the scattered shards of glass, thinking that it was a miracle that any of the occupants had come out of it alive.

In the next instant, the ambulance leaped ahead. The lights of a car appeared in the distance, followed by another.

"They've heard about the wreck in town," Dr. Malone said. "I hope Sylvia's ready for us."

"As ready as anyone can be, under the circumstances," Krig Bales commented. "She couldn't reach Morgan."

Morgan, Tracey remembered, had been the name of the tiny hospital's director of Nursing Services, who had quit, Bull Farrel had said, because "her legs gave out." A nurse needed a pair of good sound legs under her, Tracey thought. Too often, a nurse with a tendency toward varicose veins had trouble when she grew older because of the merciless hours spent on her feet. No doubt that had been Mrs. Morgan's problem. Still, it wouldn't prevent her from helping out in an emergency. If she could be reached, Tracey amended the thought.

"We'll manage without her," Dr. Malone said. "We'll have to." He turned toward Tracey, his tan face no more than a blur in the faint light, his hazel eyes a dark flash. "I'm glad you're here," he said, the musical tones of his rich voice muted . . . soothing . . . grateful.

7

THERE WAS NO time to change from the new Western outfit Cory Flynn had bought for her when they reached the hospital. Sylvia West entered emergency with wrinkled scrubgowns; ordered both Tracey and Dr. Malone to slip them on over their clothes.

Dr. Malone seemed not to have heard the older nurse, concentrating his attention on the slim blond girl with the bluish lump on her head.

"An agglutination on the severed radial." Miss West turned to Tracey, her voice sharp, her eyes totally impersonal.

Dr. Malone lifted his head long enough to glance at Tracey, giving her, she thought, a conspiratorial look. She wanted to tell the crisp nurse that the order had already been issued . . . by a doctor, an M.D. . . . She hurried from emergency to the room where her patient lay. There hadn't been enough beds in emergency to handle the four injured youngsters.

The boy was still conscious, although shock had progressed to a point where he appeared to have lost all interest in his surroundings. Perspiration, cold, clammy, dampened his brow. Tracey couldn't stifle the tingle of alarm that flowed through her at the sight of his pinched blue lips. Rose Calahan had taken charge while Tracey washed her hands at the sink in emergency.

"I'd better get back to the first two Krig brought us," Rose said. "The boy's in bad shape. A lot of pain."

Tracey remembered the girl, whose face had been spat-

tered by flying glass. "The other one. Can she see?" she asked.

"She's crying with her eyes closed," Rose Calahan said. "Pink tears."

Unexpectedly, a lump rose in Tracey's throat, as Rose hurried out, leaving her alone with her patient. He turned his head toward her, his dilated pupils unseeing. Dextran, she thought. It would take an hour to cross-match his blood with that of a donor—if a donor could be found. He couldn't hang on that long. She pierced his earlobe; drew blood into a pipette. Seconds later, she was mingling it with the dextran on a white plate, a drop at a time, until the pink agglomeration was formed. She used a glass rod to stir it, watching as she worked for signs of clumping. She had done agglutinations at Good Faith Hospital, and had never found an incompatibility. Still, there were a few patients whose blood refused to mingle; who would die if the whitish-yellow liquid were dripped into their veins.

She directed a bright light onto the mixture, leaning her dark head over it, her eyes alerted for signs of curdling . . . and found them! The agglutination was unmistakable, even to her naked eye. She drew a sharp breath. They would have to substitute—get a blood volume expander into the boy's veins to rally him.

She rushed into emergency, where Dr. Malone still worked over the unconscious girl, administering oxygen, mixed with ten per cent carbon dioxide, to stimulate respiration. His tanned face was drawn with concern. She wasn't responding, Tracey thought. It was possible that they might lose one of their patients. Even two . . . She snipped the paralyzing thought short. Dr. Malone, aware of her presence, glanced up before she could speak.

"Incompatible," she told him, the single word barely more than a whisper. No more was necessary between medical people.

Sylvia West, who stood beside him, glanced up sharply, her dark eyes accusing, Tracey thought, as though the incompatibility were somehow her fault.

"Six per cent gum acacia in saline," Dr. Malone or-

dered, before the dark-eyed nurse could speak. "Saline with dextrose by mouth and rectum."

Tracey repeated the order after him, a habit she had acquired at Good Faith Hospital. It was too easy for a nurse to misunderstand an oral order—to make a mistake.

The boy had slipped farther into shock when she returned. She worked swiftly, preparing the intravenous solution, sterilizing the injection area and applying the tourniquet to the middle of the boy's good arm. The median cephalic and median basilic veins, at the front of the elbow, seemed to have disappeared, beneath the drained looking skin. She leaned close, waiting for the pressure of the tourniquet to build up blood; cause the veins to expand. And found the curving blue line she sought, slowly swelling.

She inserted the needle, pointing it toward the heart, adjusting the hanging bottle for slow infusion, her alert mind tabulating. Five hundred cc's per fifteen minutes was the usual rate of infusion.

She worked over the boy, lowering the head of the bed a little, finding another of the plain wool hospital blankets to spread over him. The injury to his wrist had started to bleed again. She removed the blood-soaked bandage and applied another, using firm pressure to control the jet-like spurts. The saline with dextrose, next . . .

She was administering the last few drops when Dr. Malone stepped into the room. She knew, by the expression on his face, that the unconscious girl with the head injury was still alive. "Breathing a bit more normally now," he said. "West is with her. I've sent the first one to X-ray. His hip's dislocated. Fractured, I'm afraid. The tibia, too. And his ankle. How is your boy doing?"

She was thankful, as he leaned over the high bed to examine the boy's arm, that color had begun to flow into the too-white face, the pinched cyanotic lips. The boy opened his eyes. She noted that the luster had started to come back, that the dilated pupils had diminished in size.

"We'll fix him upright here," Dr. Malone said, his skillful hands tender, as he examined the lacerated wrist once more.

She hurried out to central supply—the door to the small room was labeled—to prepare a tray, thinking that the wound on the boy's wrist was ragged. Some metal part of the car, shredded by the impact, had torn free to rend the boy's flesh. There would be pathogenic bacteria present; bacteria of a violent nature that could cause infection—tetanus. She found a standing tray, and covered it with a sterile towel. Antispetic, next. And dressings. Scissors to trim the edges of the wound. Needles and sutures . . .

She measured the tetanus antitoxin carefully—1500 units injected subcutaneously as a prophylactic. The information was there, tucked neatly into the recesses of her mind. She reached into a spotless glass case for gauze to protect the hypodermic needle.

They were applying the moist dressing to the wound, when Krig Bales stuck his head through the doorway. "The multiple fracture is set up," the anesthetist said, his hands still damp from the solutions he had used for development of the plates.

Tracey remembered the radiologists on hand at Good Faith Hospital—a whole generous bevy of them—and wondered how Dr. Malone managed with a single anesthetist, who was ambulance driver, X-ray technician and goodness-knew-what-else all rolled into one. There would be no skilled radiologist, as there had been at Good Faith, to read the radiographs—the plates that would determine the extent of the boy's fractures. It would be up to Dr. Malone to stand before the lighted viewing box, determining for himself what the plates meant. And when he had determined, to act . . . At Good Faith, the radiologist held a consultation with the consulting physician.

"Letty? Letty?" The boy on the bed was asking again about the blond girl.

"Just down the hall," Dr. Malone said gently.

"She wasn't supposed . . . to go . . . to the rodeo with me," the boy managed. "Her . . . folks don't know . . ."

"Things will work out," Dr. Malone told him, his voice calm, reassuring. "The important thing right now is for you to lie quietly. Rest."

Tracey adjusted the boy's blankets once more before leaving the room, tucking them around his neck over the extended arm where the intravenous still dripped slowly. She would run in to check on it, from time to time, or ask Rose . . .

Sylvia West appeared in the corridor, as they emerged from the boy's room, her face somber.

"I've seen the plates," Miss West said. "Comminuted fracture of the astragalus. The ankle bone," she added, her dark eyes on Tracey.

Tracey remembered what Rose Calahan had said about Sylvia West wanting to be an M.D. For a nurse to assume the role of diagnostician was unthinkable in any medical situation. At Good Faith Hospital, Miss West would have received a sharp reprimand from the doctor in charge. For a brief instant, she thought that Dr. Malone was going to let the older nurse's breach of medical ethics pass. Then she saw his eyes, their hazel depths illuminated with some inner fire. Anger, she thought. And in the next instant, knew that she had been right.

"Don't forget, West, that you are a nurse, here," he said. A current of emotion, almost visible, passed between the two. Sylvia West turned away first, spinning on a rubber heel to hurry off down the corridor, but not before Tracey had seen the embarrassment flaming in her cheeks. And something else, Tracey thought—despair. She shook the thought aside, telling herself that she was imagining things. It was that kind of night . . .

Dr. Malone glanced at her, the yellow flecks of anger dimming, the clear depths of his eyes growing cloudy with some new emotion. Pity, she thought, with a glimmer of surprise. He took a deep breath, that issued as a sigh of resignation. "I need a director of Nursing Services," he said, pushing open the door to X–ray. He might have been commenting on the weather. Then, in that same matter-of-fact tone, "How about it?"

"Doctor?" She glanced up at him, her blue eyes questioning, thinking that she had misunderstood. Or was he joking . . . Making a jest of the little scene with Miss West.

She saw that his hazel eyes were dead serious above his

fine mouth; a mouth compressed with some controlled emotion. "If you're interested in the job, come in tomorrow," he said, his voice short and clipped. But melodious, still, she thought, in spite of the trace of annoyance ringing through it.

Director of Nursing Services. She hadn't misunderstood him. Her heart pounded suddenly at the idea of working beside Dr. Shannon Malone. With him . . .

8

DR. MALONE'S words were still ringing in her ears when she awoke the following morning. She glanced at her small bedside clock. Ten a.m. She had worked beside Teal Lake's only M.D. until the wee hours. He had asked her to assist with the girl whose face had been spattered with glass—Jeannie Craig, her name was. And the multiple fracture, although Sylvia West and Rose Calahan had been present, in addition to two crisp, efficient night nurses, both of them middle-aged and experienced.

The tiniest of glass shards had sifted into Jeannie Craig's eyes. The eyeballs hadn't been pierced—Tracey had breathed another little prayer of thanks for that mercy. The girl's eyelids had been scratched, however, and dangerously irritated, enough to turn her tears pink. Tracey had assisted, while Dr. Malone, a reflector glowing against his tan brow, had searched the girl's eyes for the errant fragments of glass. They had laved the injured corneas with drops of bland oil, and mild silver proteinate to serve as an antiseptic. And had applied hot compresses to subdue irritation . . . The girl would see.

The idea that she might step into the orderly little hospital as director of Nursing Services had grown as she worked over the girl, and later through the long, tedious task of caring for the fracture victim's badly shattered leg. It had been necessary to treat the boy for shock, to reduce the splint on the fractured tibia before they could relocate his hip. Krig Bales had anestetized the boy, and they had placed him in a dorsal position, with his leg drawn up against his thigh, his thigh onto his abdomen.

Dr. Malone had worked for more than an hour, taking great pains to avoid further injury to the comminuted ankle—Sylvia West's diagnosis had been correct—as he adducted the boy's thigh, rotating it outward, circumducing it across the abdomen, and back to a straight position. They put the boy in traction.

They would have to take him out again, Tracey thought, when the specialist Dr. Malone had called in to assist with the boy's ankle arrived by private plane, bringing with him the hook plate that would be implanted to serve as an internal splint. The ankle had been broken in a complex fashion, making firm healing unlikely, without the shiny stainless steel implant.

She sat up in bed realizing that she had been thinking of the impending surgery in terms of her own presence. She wanted to be there, in spite of Sylvia West's authoritative ways. A nurse liked to follow a difficult case through to the end.

She went to take her shower, still toying with the idea, thinking that she would appear in Dr. Malone's office, as he had suggested, for an interview. She was toweling herself, rubbing her soft clear skin to a rose-petal glow, when the words Sylvia West had spoken to her on their first meeting popped into her mind again. *Shan needed someone, and you were there.*

She wondered, as she slipped into fresh underwear and a simple blue cotton dress that matched the shade of her eyes, if Dr. Malone were always so impetuous. And, as was often the case when one acted on impulse, did he regret his impetuous acts, when his eagerness—anger, in this particular instance—had cooled?

She would test him, she decided on the way down to breakfast, by taking him up on his offer. She glanced up to see Colt Malone lounging against the newel post at the foot of the curving stair, his eyes bright, deliberate, as he watched her descend.

"Good morning," he greeted her. "Princess," he added, with a grin that angled his lips away from his fantastically white teeth.

His pure animal magnetism seemed to draw her, in spite of the fact that she hadn't given Colt Malone a

thought since she had left him at the table beneath the trees in her aunt's back yard. She had never seen skin so dark, she thought, or teeth so white. His eyes were lake-clear, demanding her full attention. She smiled, wondering who had let him in, putting the question into words.

"Nobody," he told her. "Why should they? We don't lock doors, around here."

Cory Flynn appeared behind him through the dining room doorway, her small lined face taking on new lines that Tracey analyzed at once as displeasure. It was the same look she had seen on her aunt's face the night before when she had told Cory that Colt had asked her to sit with him at dinner. Surely Cory didn't dislike Colt, she thought, stepping off of the last step to kiss her aunt, seeing the extra little lines vanish as she permitted herself to be led to the steaming buffet, that put the colorless breakfast—poached egg, thin slices of buttered toast, and a little pleated cup of jelly—she had grown accustomed to at Good Faith Hospital to shame. Thick steaks, still sizzling; biscuits; potatoes and gravy and—Tracey had to blink her eyes twice, before she could believe it—a flaky crusted pie. Cory had sent ham to her room that first morning at the ranch, and huge hunks of homemade bread, toasted in the oven and thickly buttered.

Colt seemed to take the copious quantities of food for granted, helping himself to a plate, pouring steaming coffee from the immense urn at one end of the big table.

"My cook is from Texas," Cory explained, when Tracey commented on the abundance. "Ranch hands expect a full meal three times a day."

It occurred to Tracey that others had eaten breakfast before her; men who worked for her aunt, and whom she had yet to meet. She fixed her own plate, daring to take one of the steaks, immense though it was, and hot coffee, thinking that everything about her aunt's way of life was different, including the big, wild country, and its acres and acres of sage covered desert. And the men . . . she glanced at Colt, watching him cut into a steak with obvious relish, popping a thick, savory morsel between his white teeth. Attitudes differed, too, she thought, reminding herself of Dr. Malone's offer.

Colt lifted his bright eyes to smile at her. "Tracey and I have some unfinished business," he said to Cory, pulling his blue gaze away to look at her aunt, whom she noted was fighting down the little look of displeasure, trying to smile naturally at the young bronzed rancher. She wondered what he was talking about, thinking back to the evening before, when their conversation had been interrupted by the urgency of the accident. Memory came flooding back, bring a flush to her cheeks. She was aware of Cory watching her.

"There was something I wanted to demonstrate to Tracey on the trail," Colt said teasingly.

Unexpectedly, she found herself liking him more than she had been prepared to like any man, on such short notice, responding to his irresistible smile, that was knowingly boyish and more than a little bit demanding.

"I'll have to take a raincheck on the trail ride, for the time being," she said, thinking that it would be exhilarating to ride beside the young rancher through the endless miles of sun-fragrant sage.

"What's wrong with right now?" he asked, frankly curious.

"Your brother has asked me to be his director of Nursing Services," she announced, being purposely dramatic, aware of Cory Flynn's sudden look of surprise, and the unshielded expression of pleasure that followed it, glancing across her aunt's nutbrown features.

"Tracey! That's marvelous!" Cory jumped up to peck her cheek. "I thought, when I asked you to come for the summer . . ." Her aunt paused, looking sheepish. Tracey comprehended, suddenly, that Cory Flynn had had something more than a casual visit to the Flying Flynn in mind when she had issued her invitation. "I might as well confess," Cory said. "I hoped you'd help Shan out. Take a job at the hospital, as floor nurse, if nothing better offered itself. It would have been marvelous experience. But this . . ."

"Sylvia will murder you," Colt Malone stated, his blue eyes shrewd.

"I'm on the board of directors." Cory ignored him. "Dr. Malone, as chief of staff, has full administrative power.

But it helps when his choices are acceptable to us all." Her tone of voice indicated that Tracey Talbot, R.N., would be, without a doubt, totally acceptable. If only because she happened to be Cory Flynn's niece, Tracey found herself thinking with a twinge of displeasure. As one of the richest ranch owners in the broad upland valley, Cory Flynn's influence was considerable. She hadn't come to Teal Lake to exploit her aunt's good name, Tracey thought. She would have to work extra hard, if she accepted the job. Prove that she was capable, competent, and efficient. All of the qualities a good nurse must possess, regardless of who her aunt might be.

"Sylvia has never been acceptable," Colt Malone said, bluntly. "Not since . . ."

"If Shan is expecting you, dear, perhaps you should get ready," Cory Flynn interrupted him.

"Not since her fling with Dr. Bryson," Colt continued, unperturbed. "Scandalized the whole county, it did. Everybody but Shan, that is. I think he must have felt sorry for the girl."

"Shan is a man, and Sylvia was there," Cory Flynn said. Tracey caught her breath. It was essentially the same statement that Sylvia West had made about Shannon Malone. "Chasing after him," Cory added, "with both barrels loaded, not that I blame the girl. You'd have succumbed, too, Colt, had you been in Shan's place. Any red-blooded male would have. Most wouldn't have had sense enough to see what Sylvia is." Colt started to protest. "Not even you, my boy," Cory said, giving him a look.

"You two make it sound as though Syliva West is the original scarlet women," Tracey heard herself saying. "As director of nursing, I'll need to know all there is to know about the members of my staff," she added, a little thrill going through her at the idea of actually serving in that capacity. "Besides, I'm a big girl, now."

"Sylvia is ambitious," Cory Flynn stated in precise tones. "She seems to have a penchant for getting herself involved with Teal Lake's M.D.s. Dr. Bryson for instance. He opened an office here eight years ago. Everyone in town drew a breath of relief, even though we knew

nothing about the man. He simply appeared one day with his little shingle. We'd been without an M.D. for more than three years. And Shan was still in pre-med, at the time," she added, her eyes bright with remembering. "Sylvia finished training about the same time that Dr. Bryson came. Everyone took it for granted that she would work with him, including Sylvia. The first thing we knew, she was running his office for him. Administering the new drugs, sulpha, penicillin."

"Most office nurses do," Tracey said.

"The point is, Sylvia was responsible for a death. A tiny baby," Colt Malone said, the tender words sounding ludicrous coming from him. He paused for effect, his turquois eyes coldly amused. "She administered an overdose."

"It would have been Dr. Bryson's responsibility," Tracey said. "A nurse acts on doctor's orders."

"Dr. Bryson was out of town, at the time," Colt said. "Some convention or other. The baby developed a staph infection, during his absense."

"Was it a newborn?" Tracey asked, her medical curiosity fully alerted.

Cory Flynn nodded. "Dr. Bryson took Sue Ann to Klamath Falls for the delivery. The baby was only three days old when they brought it home."

"Something like that could have happened to any nurse," Tracey said, feeling an intense loyalty to her profession; a sudden sympathy for the dark-eyed nurse. "With the attending physician out of town, and no one else to call . . ." Sylvia West would have administered one of the mycins. Oleandomycin had proved most effective against the dread staphylococcus . . .

"It happened more than once," Colt said.

"You mean . . . Another patient?" Tracey looked at him, her eyes wide with disbelief.

"An old sheepherder, by the name of Peck. George Peck. Allergic to penicillin. Sylvia had been pumping it into him for a week. They found him out at his shack, bloated up like a toad. I understand it does some people that way," Colt added. "The county coroner made the trip over from Klamath Falls to do an autopsy. They sus-

pected poison. Dr. Bryson claimed he had never heard of old George, when the coroner came around asking questions. He took the man to his files, and pulled the P's." Colt took out a packet of tabacco and a brown slip of paper, manipulating them between his surprisingly agile fingers.

Tracey watched the cigarette form with absent-minded fascination. Sylvia West wouldn't have administered penicillin without an adequate reason. She put the thought into words.

"George Peck had a wound on his thigh. An ugly gash that Sylvia claimed Dr. Bryson had dressed. She also claimed that he had ordered the penicillin. Nothing came of the incident. The coroner marked the death off as accidental."

"If George Peck had been somebody. But he wasn't. Just a mangy old sheepherder," Cory Flynn said, her voice bitter. "Dr. Bryson and Sylvia were engaged by then. Sylvia always wanted to be an M.D., herself. She started reading med books at an early age. Fancied herself an authority before she ever entered nurse's training."

I think she's jealous of Dr. Malone . . . Tracy found herself remembering Rose Calahan's comment. The nurse's words still didn't quite make sense. "Why didn't she enter med school?" she asked.

"A sheepherder's daughter?" Colt turned incredulous eyes on her. "Don't forget, honey, that this part of Oregon is the last stronghold of the Old West. It went cattle when the big wool shed in town was turned into a slaughter house for beef, fifty years ago. Sylvia's dad couldn't keep his family in beans, let alone send a kid off to med school. Sylvia was lucky to make it through nurse's training. I understand she worked nights in the hospital laundry."

"I admire the girl for that," Cory Flynn said. "She's had to work hard to get where she is. She cared for her father, after she became an R.N. Shep West, Sylvia's dad, developed that shaking disease. Shaking palsy, they called it in my day." Cory glanced at Tracey, pride tinging her voice. "You'd know all about it, honey."

"Parkinson's disease." Tracey supplied the proper term.

"Shep died of some complication, just before the new hospital opened. Shan was here, by then, to look after him. He and Sylvia had just announced their engagement. Shep died thinking his daughter was set for life. And just as well. He'd had it tough. Then to have Sylvia's name bandied about in connection with those deaths . . . It's no wonder he took to drinking cheap wine. And no wonder, too, that Sylvia has developed an overpowering drive."

An overpowering drive . . . The words echoed through Tracey's mind, as she walked out to Colt Malone's car ten minutes later. The young rancher had offered to drive her into town. "If you must be clinical," he said, with one of his indulgent smiles. "And I'll have to admit that it's time Shan got someone to replace Morgan, before Sylvia wears him down. The townspeople still remember the Bryson affair. They wouldn't take kindly to Shan making her his director of nursing."

"Whatever happened to Dr. Bryson," Tracey asked, climbing into the bucket seat—Colt's car, she discovered, was identical to Dr. Malone's, except that it was a bright red. Tracey thought, with the part of her mind that wasn't involved with the story her aunt and Colt had told about Sylvia West, that the choice of car colors symbolized the difference between the two brothers. Colt was outgoing, flashy even, like the red car, in a purely physical way with his outstanding good looks and his colorful Western clothes. Dr. Malone was quiet, conservative, his body as streamlined as the sleek black car he drove.

"He left town shortly after the Peck incident," Colt said. "He had been an outsider, to begin with."

"And Sylvia? What did she do, until Dr. Malone came?"

"She disappeared for awhile," Colt said. "I heard that she was working over on the coast for awhile. When she heard Shan was back with his sheepskin, she turned up again. And became his office nurse, of course. I don't know what she told Shan about the Dr. Bryson incident. Whatever it was, it must have been convincing. Two

months after, she started working for Shan, they were engaged. It lasted until we got together and built the hospital for him. Sylvia wanted the director of nursing job. The board convinced Shan that it wouldn't look right. He agreed, grim-mouthed about the whole thing, as though he knew something in Sylvia's favor that the rest of us didn't know. He's kept her on, partly because there aren't enough nurses in this valley. And because . . ." he shrugged his shoulders. "Like your aunt said, Shan's a man, and Sylvia is there." He gave her a look. "And you're here. And I'm glad," he added unexpectedly, his fabulous eyes faceted with a myriad of dancing lights, seeming to draw her like the delightful promises of a prism draw a child.

She allowed him to slip his arm along the back of the bucket seat. He squeezed her soft shoulder a little, with blunt fingers that felt warm and substantial. It was pleasant racing along the straight empty road with him at a tremendous speed, feeling the warm air whip across her. Feeling, too, a little bit afraid.

She glimpsed a dust cloud, in the distance, like the one that had heralded Sagebrush Tom's little flock of sheep, and remembered the exquisitely carved sage grouse Dr. Malone had purchased for her from the strange old man. It had been a warm, welcoming gesture, on his part, she thought. No more than that, although at the time she had been touched more than she cared to admit.

The sheep appeared, trotting down the center of the road in their hurried, bouncing way, their small, black hooves dainty beneath their puffed gray bodies. She glimpsed the dog, becoming suddenly frantic at the sound of the red car's hoarse throbbing engine, scurrying around his charges, raising little spurts of gravel with his paws, when he stopped suddenly to nip impatiently at the dumb animals.

"Colt!" They were getting too near to be traveling at such a speed. "Colt! You're going to hit them!"

The man beside her laughed. "We don't give way to sheep in this valley," he said.

He was joking, she thought crazily. Trying to scare her, like a small boy playing a prank on a flightly girl. He

would slam on the brakes, at the last minute . . . slow the speeding automobile. She tore her eyes away from the swiftly approaching puffs of dust to glance at his face, and saw that he had meant what he said. He had no intention of stopping for the little band of sheep, or for the old man who appeared, an alkali powdered wraith, in the dust behind them. The dog, sensing impending danger, danced frantically, tearing into the center of the flock with renewed vigor, his yips shrill in the light air. The sheep, startled by his strange behavior, panicked. The dog swung out around them, driving them into the brush, biting at the laggards, forcing them to half-climb through the low stand of sage. Tracey glimpsed his red mouth, as they passed; saw blood on the flank of one of the ewes; glimpsed the old man's red-eyed, bearded face, as he turned, hurling an oath, to watch them race on in a cloud of bitter, blinding dust. He raised something, and shook it after them. The empty burlap bag, Tracey thought crazily.

Colt laughed. "Did you see the old fool?" His eyes glittered with some perverse pleasure. "It would have been worth running down one of the beasts to see that. You'd have thought we'd. . . ." Then, when he saw that she wasn't amused, "Honey? You didn't think . . . I could have slammed on the brakes in time, if old Tom's dog hadn't made it. I didn't mean . . ." Contrition replaced the look that had bordered on sadistic pleasure, Tracey thought, with a little corner of her mind, driving away his laughter, stifling his enjoyment of the frightening little incident, making her feel suddenly guilty . . .

"I'm . . . I'm not accustomed to these fast cars," she managed. "I didn't know . . ." She paused. "Dr. Malone and I stopped to chat with Sagebrush Tom yesterday, on the way out to Aunt Cory's. He showed us his carvings. As a matter of fact, Dr. Malone bought a couple for me, to keep as sourvenirs." She changed the subject, turning it away from the near tragedy. "They're exquisite. Except that he wouldn't sell the one I wanted most. A carving of the White Maiden." She glanced at Colt, thinking that she was rattling on—talking too much. She was more shaken than she realized.

"You know about her, then?" Colt asked.

"Dr. Malone told me," she said.

"When I was a kid, I used to wait out there for her," Colt Malone said. "Dad had seen her once, a long time ago. He didn't talk much about it. Just enough to make me curious," he gave her a look. "I still am," he said. His eyes grew vivid with a sudden inspiration. "Say, how about letting me take you. The leaves start to turn on the mountain aspens with the first frost. That's when she comes . . ."

Tracey glanced at him and saw that he was serious. "If I'm still here," she said, wondering what her mother would say when she wrote to her parents, telling them that she had been invited to meet a ghost. The thought brought a relaxing little smile to her soft mouth.

"You will be," Colt said, his voice confident. Without warning, he slowed the red car, bringing it to an abrupt halt at the edge of the graveled road. "I like you, Tracey Talbot," he said, his white teeth gleaming between his expressive lips. "When I like a girl, I want her to know it." He pulled her to him. Those same lips, grown hard and demanding, closed upon her own.

She endured his kiss, aware of the strong masculine odor that emanated from him. Not like the scent that seemed to cling to medical men—the few interns and house officers she had dated, and who had attempted to kiss her. The rich, clinging aroma of the pouch tobacco, tucked into the pocket of his Western shirt mingled with the leathery smell of his boots, and the more illusive scent of his hair and smooth, bronzed skin. She found herself responding to him in a purely animal way, enjoying the strange, new aroma of him, feeling a little bit frightened at the feel of his rugged arms clasped roughly around her slim, smooth shoulders.

He released her, his eyes as bright as the sapphires in a pin her father had given her mother for Christmas the year Tracey was nine. The faceted stones had fascinated her. Colt Malone's eyes fascinated her, now, titillating her senses in a way that was completely alien to her.

She drew away from him, fearful of the strange emotions that gripped her. She didn't love Colt Malone. She

was positive of that. And because she didn't love him, the feelings he aroused in her frightened her all the more. Perhaps, after she had known him longer . . . The thought that she might learn to love him, filtered slowly through her mind. It would take time . . .

"Please," she said, brushing the thought aside. "I must get to the hospital. Shan,"—the name slipped out, "Dr. Malone," she amended, "will be expecting me."

9

SHE FELT MUSSED when she arrived at the hospital, as though the imprint of Colt Malone's lips and hands were somehow visible against the smoothness of her lips and body.

"Colt had the windows open all the way from the ranch," she made excuses to Rose Calahan, when the young, freckle-faced nurse all but ran into her in the hospital corridor. "I need to find the powder room."

"Show me the girl who doesn't after a bout with Colt Malone," Rose grinned, her short nose crinkling, as she showed Tracey into a small tiled lavatory. "I saw the two of you drive up," she added. "I hope Smokey Denton wasn't watching."

"Is she here?" Tracey asked, remembering the way the silver-haired girl had watched her with Colt at the barbecue. Not that Smokey Denton hadn't seemed happy enough with Dr. Malone . . .

"Come to see Sonny Farrel, who, incidentally, is much improved," Rose told her. "Dr. Malone gave Smokey permission to see him for a few minutes before visiting hours. His dad will be here, then."

"I don't understand," Tracey said.

"About Smokey and Sonny, or about Smokey and Bull Farrel?" Rose asked.

"All three," Tracey said.

"Smokey's anathema so far as Bull Farrel is concerned," Rose said. "Smokey and Sonny worked out a trick riding act together when they were still just kids, sixteen or seventeen. They surprised everybody at the

rodeo that year, by filling in as the specialty. You should have heard Bull bellow, that day. No boy of his was going to take up rodeoing." Rose mimicked the elder Farrel comically. "He stomped into the ring, and jerked Sonny off of his mount, in front of the whole crowd. Humiliated the poor kid half to death. Took away his saddle for a year. Made him flunky for the cook at roundup." Rose paused. "Smokey worked up an act without Sonny after that, and went on the circuit. Sonny never has gotten rodeoing out of his blood. He'd take off with Smokey today, if he had money for the fancy gear a specialty rider has to have—silver–plated saddles, lamé suits. Stuff like Smokey turns out in. Bull keeps a tight rein on Sonny," Rose added. "For all that he'll be twenty-one before snow flies. He'd rather see Sonny turn rustler, than lose him to the circuit."

"What has he got against rodeoing?" Tracey asked, trying to sound informed, knowing, even in her city ignorance, that going on the circuit meant to follow the rodeos around the country.

"Sonny's mother was a rodeo queen before Bull married her," Rose said. "Trick rider, like Smokey. It killed her."

"Bull said she died on the way to the hospital in Klamath Falls. Because there were no facilities here, no doctor."

"Her horses dragged her," Rose explained. "She was working out an act. She never did give up rodeoing completely, even though Bull wouldn't allow her to ride publicly after they were married. She was trying to ride two horses at once, like they do, that day. Smoething spooked them. She fell. Got her foot tangled in the fancy rigging she'd put on them." Rose paused. "My dad liked to take pictures, when he could take time out from the ranch. He happened to be at the Farrel place when it happened. The picture is tucked away, somewhere, in the attic."

"You mean . . . ?" Tracey shuddered.

"Things like that happen in cattle country," Rose said. "It's part of our history. Someday, when I give up nursing, I'm going to write a text to go with dad's pictures. The blessed saints willing," she added, a grin sitting

crookedly on her gamin face. She turned in a rustle of immaculate uniform to go back on the floor. And turned again, her green eyes bright. "I almost forgot. You wanted to know about Smokey and Colt. A girl like Smokey has to have a love life. She sees a lot of Colt when she's not following the circuit. Colt used to ride with her and Sonny, when he was in the mood. Her relationship with Sonny Farrel is strictly platonic. Brother-sister stuff. Colt provided the romantic angle. Still does." Rose spilled the explanation hurriedly, glancing at her watch. "When Smokey's in town. Other times, too, if Colt takes a notion to saddle up that shiny red car of his and chase her down —Phoenix, Houston, Dallas. Wherever there's a rodeo, you'll find Smokey Denton. And as often as not, Colt Malone." Rose paused for breath. "He followed her to Davie, Florida, last spring. Dr. Malone mentioned it at the time, disapprovingly," Rose grinned. "Not that I blame him. It is rather scandalous."

Tracey touched fresh lipstick to her mouth, only half hearing the girl, thinking instead about the kiss Colt had given her. She hadn't dreamed that he and Smokey Denton . . . And even if she had known, she thought, he would still have kissed her. Colt was that kind of man, going his own way, taking what he wanted. She had sensed as much with her first awareness of his strong animal appeal. It was possible that he had grown tired of Smokey Denton, the same way that she, herself, had tired of more than one of the eager interns at Good Faith Hospital. A girl—and a man, too, she reasoned—had to get to know more than one member of the opposite sex, before choosing for life. How else could a person know if it was real? For keeps?

She dropped her lipstick back into her purse, startled by the turn her thoughts had taken. She had only just met the Malones—Shan and Colt. The last thing she intended to do, while visiting the "yonder" country, that was home to her aunt, was to choose any man, for keeps, or otherwise. She was an R.N., a dedicated nurse with long years ahead of her in her chosen profession. Marriage, she told herself, taking a firm grip on the doorknob, was the farthest thing from her mind.

She found Dr. Shannon Malone seated in his office, his dark head bent over the sheaf of neatly typed letters and forms that he was in the process of signing. Sylvia West hovered nearby, starched, efficient looking, her dark eyes anxious. "It's nearly time for Dr. Nielson to arrive," she said. "He'll be expecting you at the airport."

Dr. Malone glanced up, seeming to see Tracey waiting outside the open doorway for the first time. He smiled, the yellow flecks dancing to sudden life in his hazel eyes. "All right, Sylvia," he told the nurse, his anger of the day before apparently dissolved. "I'll get out there right away. Have the plate on Tim ready."

"The plates and records on the multiple fracture have been assembled, Doctor," Sylvia West said, her voice businesslike.

"We'll leave right away," Dr. Malone told her, motioning, at the same time, for Tracey to come into his office.

"We?" Sylvia West gave him a questioning look.

"Tracey and I," he said. "We have some business to discuss."

"I don't understand," Sylvia began.

"I've asked Miss Talbot to accept a position as director of Nursing Services at Teal Lake Hospital," Dr. Malone stated, his melodious voice suddenly formal, quietly authoritative.

The dark-eyed nurse's knuckles whitened against the clipboard she carried. Her face blanched, beneath the starched purity of her cap. "I . . . I'll be in supply, if you need me, Doctor." She turned, without looking at Tracey, pivoting sharply on a muffled heel and stalked stiffly from the room.

Dr. Malone watched her retreat, his eyes suddenly unfathomable.

"I didn't come here to . . ." Tracey began, cutting herself short, searching for words. "To intrude," she added lamely, her blue eyes earnest. It was possible that Dr. Malone regretted his impulsive offer, now that his irritation with Sylvia West had had a chance to cool.

The thought chilled her. She had come rushing to him as eager as a schoolgirl, thinking that she, with her limited experience, could step into the small hospital and

successfully carry out the duties of a director of Nursing Services, which, she reminded herself, included keeping peace among his staff. There could be no dissension . . .

"You aren't," Dr. Malone was saying. "It's just that Sylvia isn't suited for the job," he added, turning to close a window, not looking at her.

"Why do you keep her on staff?" She was horrified at the impertinence of her words, after they were out. It was none of her business. Yet. The single word burned through her thoughts. If Dr. Malone still wanted her as director of nurses, and she accepted the position, she would have to cope with Sylvia West.

"I have my reasons." Dr. Malone's terse comment sliced through her confusion. Above the harsh line of his drawn lips, his hazel eyes seemed to beg for understanding.

The moment passed. He reached to take her elbow, steer her through the doorway. When she glanced at him again, there was no trace of distress in his face. He returned her tentative smile, his eyes glowing, a man looking at a pretty girl—appreciating her.

For no reason at all, Rose Calahan's suggestion came into her mind. It would be easy to respond to Dr. Shannon Malone—to lure him a little. And Colt . . . The Malone brothers were equally attractive, in their individual ways, Tracey thought, smiling at her confusion, as Dr. Malone helped her into the bucket seat of his sleek black car.

10

TEAL LAKE Hospital buzzed with speculation when Tracey Talbot, R.N., appeared the following morning, crisply immaculate in her white uniform and tilted cap. She had accepted the position as director of Nursing Services, offered to her by Dr. Shannon Malone.

"Against my better judgement," she had told her aunt, over bedtime tea the evening before.

"I know you'll do marvelously, darling." Cory Flynn had beamed at her, unable to conceal her pleasure. "In spite of Sylvia West," Tracey's aunt had added. "Maybe you can find out why Shan insists on keeping the girl on his staff."

"I'm a nurse, not a spy," Tracey had quipped, her blue eyes serious above her straight nose and generous mouth.

She recalled that particular conversation now, as she glanced up to see Sylvia West coming toward her. The older nurse paused, her face expressionless, her eyes impersonal.

"Good morning." Tracey forced a smile.

"I hope you know what you're getting yourself into, Talbot," Sylvia West said.

"I assure you I do, Miss West," Tracey said, hoping that her voice sounded more convincing than she felt.

With a sudden clarity, she recalled the numerous duties that fell upon the efficient shoulders of the director of Nursing Services at Good Faith Hospital. It occurred to her that she had accepted those same varied responsibilities by saying "yes" to Dr. Malone, when he had interviewed her on the way to the airport the day before. He

had seemed pleased with her replies to his seemingly casual questions. His acceptance of her had been informal —like everything else about the "yonder" country, she thought.

He had asked what school she had graduated from, had seemed pleased when she told him. Experience, since graduation . . . She had confessed, gravely, that her experience was limited to the few hours spent in his own hospital. And, again, he had seemed pleased, for no reason fathomable to her. They had chatted, in the way medical people do, discussing cases, treatments, techniques. Dr. Nielson had joined in their discussion on the drive back from the airport, which, Tracey had discovered, consisted of a single stretch of blacktop, three miles north of town. Tracey had liked the older doctor called in by Shan Malone for consultation, and to assist him, in the placing of the hook plate in Tim James' ankle. Dr. Malone had told her the names of all four of the accident victims. Most doctors wouldn't have remembered them, she thought now, as she hurried to the nurse's station, feeling the full weight of the responsibility she had assumed settling on her slim shoulders. As director of Nursing Services, she would be expected to transmit Dr. Malone's orders to all members of the hospital staff—nurses, orderlies, aides. To the diet kitchen, X–ray, and the small lab. It would be her duty to keep records, to see all patients, admitting new ones, overseeing the leave-taking of the recovered, routing the surgery patients to O.R., keeping tabs on their condition after surgery, greet visitors—and to maintain the all important patient-nurse-relative relationship.

There would be inventories to be made of supplies and drugs. She would be responsible for the narcotics. It was customary for two nurses to count them, together. And she must not forget the all important housekeeping. She had noticed a maid working in the small hospital, scrubbing, scouring. An Indian woman, with a sad, uncomplaining look.

It was now her duty, Tracey thought, a strange, new kind of apprehension tugging at her, to keep things running efficiently; to coordinate the many activities so that

they meshed smoothly. And still find time for patients. In a large hospital, the director of Nursing Services had little, if any time to spend with patients. Her knowledge of them came to her secondhand, through histories, laboratory reports and doctors' orders. There were nurses who preferred it that way—to remain remote from the actual nursing care—to avoid baths, bedpans, dirty dressings, messy emergencies.

She wasn't that kind of nurse, Tracey decided. In a way, serving as director in a small hospital would put her in closer contact with her patients, than if she had merely accepted a job on the floor. She would share in the care of all of the patients who entered the tiny hospital —she had asked and been told that there were fourteen beds. Scrubbing for surgery would also be part of her responsibility. Dr. Malone had asked her to scrub for the operation on Tim James' ankle. She glanced at her watch; saw that it was nearly 8:00 a.m. Dr. Malone had scheduled surgery for 9:00. She would have to hurry.

Sylvia West was in scrub when she entered, preparing to circulate. The dark-eyed nurse wielded the brush silently, without glancing at Tracey. She would have to make an effort to be friends, Tracey thought. No hospital could operate efficiently with strife and tension stalking its corridors.

"I'm not here to take him away from you." She heard herself saying the first thing that came into her mind. "Even if I could," she added, for fear of sounding conceited.

Sylvia West glanced up sharply. "I don't know what you're talking about," the nurse said, her face oddly expressionless, only her dark eyes burning.

"I think you do," Tracey told her, looking directly into the smoldering brown eyes.

Sylvia West looked away first.

They scrubbed in silence, standing side by side, two determined young women, each of them frightened, Tracey thought. She had glimpsed fear in Miss West's eyes before. There was no time to puzzle over it, now.

Krig Bales had the patient on the table when they entered surgery, the temporary cast removed; the bony,

teenage ankle shaved. The swelling in the boy's ankle had been reduced by the use of ice packs, applied almost constantly during the hours since the accident.

The little group assembled in the small room fell far short of what she had become accustomed to in the uncrowded, pale green operating rooms at Good Faith Hospital. Still, Tracey thought, as she lifted neat stacks of dressings from the pack of supplies Sylvia West brought to her, a feeling of competence prevailed.

Ten minutes later, Dr. Malone entered, green-swathed, his dark hair hidden by the wrinkled surgical cap, to group them with a mere sweep of his hazel eyes, reaching out with his mellifluous voice to weld them into a unit with a single word. "Team," he said. "Everything ready?" His glance paused on Tracey's half-hidden face.

"Yes, Doctor." Her blue gaze swept the preparations in a quick final analysis, as Sylvia West moved forward to assist Dr. Malone with the strings on his gown; to hand him the rolled latex gloves, already powdered, held carefully in a sterile towel, ready to slip onto his clean surgeon's hands. Tracey noted, with the part of her mind that wasn't occupied with the preparations, how immaculate those hands were, with their pared nails. How sensitive . . . Not like Colt Malone's reins-coarsened, big palms.

With Dr. Nielson's entrance, there were five of them arranged around the high table in the pattern prescribed by the first teams to attempt modern surgery. Dr. Malone, the surgeon, stood beside the table facing Dr. Nielson, who was present in a capacity as first assistant—Dr. Malone's only assistant. Krig Bales stood at the head of the table, involved with his machines and gauges. Tracey assumed her position beside Dr. Malone toward the foot of the table. At Good Faith Hospital, she couldn't help thinking, there would have been yet another M.D.—an intern, or house officer—standing beside him, serving as his second assistant. Teal Lake afforded no such surgical luxury.

And hovering in the background away from the table, Sylvia West, blunt-fingered, burning-eyes . . . Tracey wondered again why Dr. Malone hadn't asked Sylvia to scrub; why he hadn't made her his director of Nursing

Services, in spite of the small town's opinion? Why he kept her on at Teal Lake Hospital, if there was dissension between them? As obviously there was, Tracey couldn't help thinking, seeing Sylvia West give Dr. Malone a pleading glance. Seeing, too, something that she hadn't noticed before—Sylvia West's hands trembling ever so slightly as she passed a sterile pack of supplies to Tracey, loosening the wrapping without touching the carefully counted and sterilized sponges and pads inside. Tracey bent over the pack, watching the blunt fingers withdraw, not missing the unmistakable tremor.

In the next instant, she forgot Sylvia West as Dr. Malone's extended palm came into her range of vision. The scalpel was ready in her own hand to be slapped, flat side snapping against the latex glove.

Boldly, Dr. Malone severed the integument over the outer malleolus. He had studied the plates showing the fragmented bone, Tracey knew without having been present, and had discussed them with Dr. Nielson. He knew exactly where to incise; how far along the boy's slim leg to extend the wound for the insertion of the shining stainless steel hook plate.

They were ready for the plate, and the bright, shiny metal pins almost before she realized it. Sylvia West appeared beside her, holding the sterile packet in readiness. Tracey reached to take the metal inserts, her eyes meeting Sylvia West's dark ones for a brief instant, seeing, before the older nurse glanced downward, something that she identified as yearning in them. There was no mistaking that fluid, reaching expression . . .

Again, she wondered, with the part of her mind that was free to speculate, why Dr. Malone had relegated the nurse to the background to serve as "dirty" nurse.

Another half hour and the plate was in place, secured by three short pins, and a longer shaft of shining metal inserted through the tibia and fibula, just above the inner and outer malleolus. The strengthening metal would support the shattered bones while they mended. Tim James' ankle would be as good as new by the time his hip and leg had healed.

The cast next, ankle to hip—the boy would be misera-

ble for awhile in his casing of stubborn plaster. But he would walk again, normally, and be grateful, Tracey thought, in spite of the usual jesting complaints a nurse could expect from a cast patient.

There was time to acquaint herself with the patients in the hospital's fourteen beds when they had finished with Tim James. Rose Calahan was in charge of recovery. Her freckled face had been alight with welcome when Tracey entered the small room, walking beside the stretcher bed, seeing that the blanket was tucked firmly around the patient.

"Good luck," the freckled nurse grinned at her over Dr. Malone's dark head—he had seated himself next to the high bed to take a last minute b.p.r. Tracey felt an unexpected warmth rise to her cheeks. She knew by the expression on Rose Calahan's face that the pert nurse assumed that she had taken the advice proffered when they had scrubbed together for Sonny Farrel's surgery; that Rose Calahan thought that she was out to catch—and brand—Dr. Shannon Malone. Tracey smiled a little at the ranch-country jargon that had invaded her vocabulary. She would have to show the young nurse by her actions that she had no designs on Teal Lake's one and only M.D.

It took her minutes to shed her wrinkled scrub garb, and slip back into her starched uniform and crisp, proud cap. Sylvia West shared the nurses' room with her, dressing quickly, her blunt fingers hurrying along the row of buttons that fastened the blouse of her double-breasted uniform, trembling a little . . .

Tracey glanced sharply at the nurse's face, looking for signs of illness. A nurse sometimes overworked . . . Sylvia West returned her look, her face as closed as ever, the dark eyes almost resentful.

"O.K., so I'm tired," she said, unexpectedly.

"Maybe you'd better let me pop a thermometer under your tongue," Tracey said, feeling concern, remembering the responsibility the director of Nursing Services at Good Faith Hospital had displayed toward staff members, thinking that she must watch to make sure that no one

worked too hard. When she had finished her tour of the wards, she would arrange a practical work schedule.

"I was up late last night," Sylvia West said, without looking at her, gathering up the wide-winged cap that identified the older nurse as a graduate of Altrusa School of Nursing in California.

A second later, the dark-eyed nurse disappeared through the swinging door, the white wings riding her dark head proudly. She would arrange for a staff meeting immediately, Tracey thought, a dozen ideas flitting through her agile mind. She buttoned her own uniform impatiently. There was so much to do.

Sonny Farrel was sitting up in bed when she entered his room. His face brightened at the sight of her. "You're the one who came to my rescue out there in all of that alkali dust," he grinned, his tan face more lean, and wan than ever.

"Right," she said. "That was quite a show you put on."

"I'll tame the bronc that threw me, yet," Sonny Farrel grinned. "All I ask is for another chance at him." Then, as the lean face suddenly clouded. "If I can sneak away from the old man long enough to have that second try." He looked at Tracey. "Dad would rather see me turn rustler," he told her.

"So I understand," Tracey said. "Easier said than done, I would imagine, in this day and age."

"You haven't been reading the papers lately." Sonny Farrel gave her a look. "There are still a few untamed souls in the Old West. I admire them," he added. "No old man to dictate their every move. One good winning streak, and I could collect enough purses to set myself up as a real rodeo tramp."

"Is everything all right, Mr. Farrel?" Tracey changed the subject, a little spiral of alarm coiling through her at the intensity in the young voice.

"If everything isn't, it's going to be," the young rider said.

She left him, wondering briefly what he had meant, the thought fleeing her mind, as she stepped into Letty Byrd's room. The girl was still in a coma, although X-rays had revealed no damage to the skull. It had been impossible

to arouse the girl with external stimuli. She lay, a pale, blond child, in quiet sleep. Her mother sat beside the bed, an older version of the girl.

"She just lays there like that," the woman said, turning pleading eyes on Tracey. "Like she was asleep, or something. I've . . . I've read about cases like this. Sometimes they don't ever . . ." The words caught in the woman's throat.

Tracey moved to examine the chart at the foot of the bed, searching for words of encouragement to offer the woman. The neatly printed, abbreviated details seemed to leap at her, *"Patient ingested food normally."* . . . They hadn't had to lavage Letty, then. She glanced at the anxious mother, some of her own anxiety for the patient dispersed. If the girl could swallow . . .

"It sometimes takes a little while, in a case of traumatic injury to the head," she said. "If it's too serious, the patient can't eat. Letty has been holding her own in that department."

Mrs. Byrd's face brightened. "You wouldn't know it, to look at her, but Letty was always a big eater. I . . . I guess if she was too bad, she couldn't swallow."

"The bad ones can't," Tracey said.

Mrs. Byrd looked more cheerful when Tracey left her to step into the next room that opened off the main corridor of the small hospital. Jeannie Craig lay on the high bed, listening, her eyes covered by a compress. "Who is it?" the girl asked.

"Miss Talbot." Tracey went to take her hand. "I'm new," she added, knowing the girl wouldn't remember her.

"The rest of the kids . . ." the girl said at once. "How are they? All of them but Roy . . ."

Roy, Tracey knew, was the name of the boy who had been killed. "They're doing fine," she told the girl. "We fixed Tim's ankle this morning."

"He won't be crippled?"

"He won't be crippled," Tracey said, giving the girl's hand a little squeeze.

"Dan didn't see that truck full of horses," Jeannie said. "None of us did. Until it was too late. Maybe if Letty

hadn't had to get home . . . She wasn't supposed to go with us," the girl added. "Only she did, anyway. I hope her folks won't be too hard on her, when she . . . Dr. Malone told me about Letty." The girl paused. "He's nice, isn't he," she said unexpectedly.

"Yes," Tracey agreed. "Yes, he is."

"Is he as good looking as his voice sounds?"

"Better," Tracey said, giving the girl's hand one last squeeze, glad that Jeannie's mind had wandered away from the accident.

She found herself thinking, as she left the girl's room, that it was true. Shannon Malone, M.D., was better looking than his voice sounded. And that, Tracey told herself, with a smile, was saying quite a great deal.

The rest of the day passed quickly. Tracey found an opportunity to speak privately to each of the members of her staff, slipping into the nurses' room during a coffee break; pausing in the corridor to exchange friendly comments. When five o'clock came, she found herself feeling surprisingly at ease in her new role. Even Sylvia West had seemed to respond when she deliberately sought out the older nurse in the staff dining room at noon.

The dark-eyed nurse had regarded her with an unchanging expression, when Tracey set the plate of plain but substantial hospital food onto the formica table top, and laid aside her tray.

"I understand that you wanted the position Dr. Malone asked me to take," Tracey said, surprised, after the words were out, that she had had the courage to say them.

"That's the story that has been circulating ever since this hospital opened," Sylvia West told her. "Their story," she added. "A lot they know about it."

A maxim from her childhood flitted through Tracey's mind. there are two sides to every story. She found herself regarding Sylvia West with a sudden new interest. "Their story?"

"The people in this town. This valley," Sylvia said, her attention focused on the plate of food before her; on the forkful of potatoes she was lifting to her mouth. Suddenly, and without apparent reason, the fork dropped from her fingers, clattering to the floor.

Sylvia looked up at Tracey, her eyes guilty, Tracey thought, surprised by the nurse's expression. Abruptly, the older nurse turned away from her, rising from the table.

"Wait," Tracey said, an unexplicable feeling of pity tugging somewhere behind her sternum. "I . . . There's something I wanted to discuss with you. I'll need someone to take charge here, during my off-duty hours," she heard herself saying. "Would you consider serving in that capacity?"

Sylvia West turned, surprise filling her dark eyes. "I . . . I'll think about it," she said.

With that, Miss West turned on her heel and walked away, her straight back stiff, with some inconceivable effort, Tracey thought. And pride . . .

11

THE NEXT TWO weeks passed swiftly for Tracey. Her days at Teal Lake Hospital had assumed a pattern. She had printed her weekly time schedules neatly on ruled sheets of white paper, and had distributed copies among the staff members. Sylvia West had accepted the responsibilities of assistant director of nursing, and was no longer in the hospital during the day.

"A smart move, my girl," Rose Calahan had told Tracey jokingly. "That gives you a head start on her with our handsome doctor. Too bad there aren't enough of him to go around."

"Are you sure you aren't misjudging Sylvia?" Tracey had heard herself saying.

"You can't deny she's ambitious," Rose said.

Ambitious—or desperate, Tracey had found herself thinking.

Surprisingly, she had also found herself liking Sylvia West, more than once, during the past two weeks. She smiled at the idea now, as she hurried to answer the phone that jangled demandingly on her desk.

"Teal Lake Hospital. Miss Talbot speaking."

"Con Flannery." The name—Irish, like so many of the names in the wide, Oregon "yonder" country—sounded familiar. She remembered, in the next instant—with a nurse's cultivated faculty for recalling names—where she had heard it. Sue Ann Flannery. Her aunt had mentioned the pregnant woman at the rodeo, the day Sonny Farrel had been injured.

"Yes, Mr. Flannery," Tracey replied, anticipating his

message, thinking ahead to the O.B. room, where everything was kept in readiness for a delivery. Dr. Malone was out on a call. He would be back by the time a patient could be brought in from an outlying ranch. The Flannery's, she recalled, lived at Coyote Creek, fifty miles away—a comparatively short distance in an area where housewives thought nothing of traveling 120 miles to a supermarket. With the big, fast cars most of the ranchers drove, and the little, sage-skimming planes . . .

"Is Shan there," the rancher was saying in urgent tones.

"He's out on a call," Tracey told him. "Would you care to leave a message?" Perhaps it wasn't Sue Ann after all . . .

"The baby's on the way," Con Flannery told her. "Shan said to call him."

"How far apart are her pains?"

"Ten minutes."

Tracey bit her lower lip. Fifty miles. Thank goodness the roads in the big, upland valley were straight. "You'd better get started right away," she said.

There was a pause at the other end of the wire. "Shan is coming out here," Con Flannery told her.

"But . . ." she began, wanting to ask why. Babies simply weren't delivered at home, anymore. Especially when there were modern medical facilities available.

"It's all arranged," Con Flannery said. "Where can I get in touch with Shan?"

"I'll call him," Tracey said. "Get him started out there right away."

Her agile mind was planning even as she hung up the receiver, making a quick mental inventory of supply, remembering the plastic-wrapped bundle she had seen there. She had checked it; had found it contained O.B. supplies—scrub gowns, shirts and jackets for Dr. Malone, starched, ironed flat by the hospital laundress; packing, gloves. They would need drop ether. Hypodermic syringes, with large and small needles. She would pack those in her own bag.

She realized, as she dialed a number, that she was thinking in terms of accompanying Dr. Malone. He would

need a nurse. All of Teal Lake's nursing personnel was listed in the hospital roster. There was no one to go but herself, unless she called one of the night nurses. Or Sylvia West. There was no need for that, she reasoned. There was no immediate emergency at the hospital demanding her attention. She would leave orders for the staff.

The receiver at the other end of the line lifted. "Dr. Malone, please," she said.

"He just left," a man's voice told her—Ted Bixby. It was Dr. Malone's day to check on the rancher's aged mother, who was dying of cancer.

Tracey thanked him and hung up, her slim legs already leading her toward supply, her keen mind tabulating—thumb forceps, blunt scissors, artery clamps, cord ties and dressings. Prophylactic for the baby's eyes—silver nitrate solution, one per cent.

She glanced at her watch ten minutes later, thinking that it would take Dr. Malone another five minutes to drive into town from Bixby's. She would make a last minute check of her little domain. All but one of the accident victims had been released—Tim James on crutches, the heavy cast still in place; Jeannie Craig with a new pair of specially ground dark lenses to shield her still sensitive eyes. Only Letty Byrd remained, still in a coma. Or semi-coma, Tracey thought. The girl was able to swallow. Dan Peters, the boy who had been driving the car, came to see the girl every day; to sit, sad-faced, beside her high bed.

Sonny Farrel had been released, too, a little over a week before. His recovery had been routine. Other patients had been admitted, to replace those who had gone home. Two pregnant women—Dr. Malone had delivered them both of healthy babies. Tracey had assisted with one. The other had been born during the night hours, while Sylvia West had been on duty.

She paused for a moment in each doorway, smiling encouragingly at the occupants of the small hospital's beds, issuing last minute instructions to Rose, who sat behind the nurse's station, busy with aluminum-backed charts.

Another ten minutes passed, and Dr. Malone still hadn't arrived. A feeling of apprehension gripped her. If

he were delayed too long, Sue Ann Flannery's baby would be there . . . She made a quick decision, and went to a telephone to dial the Malone residence with an impatient finger.

"No, dear. Shan's not here," Sophie Malone told her. She heard Colt's voice in the background. A second later he was on the line.

"What is it, Tracey? Has that brother of mine run out on you?"

"He drove out to the Bixby place and hasn't returned," Tracey told him. "Have you any idea where he might be? The Flannery baby is on the way."

"And that one, thanks to Bryson and Sylvia, is a home case," Colt said.

"I don't understand . . ."

"It was the Flannery's first born who developed staph. They don't trust hospitals anymore. Or nurses."

"I have to contact Dr. Malone," Tracey said, remembering now that Cory had mentioned Sue Ann in connection with the unfortunate staph incident.

"Maybe you'd better go on out to the Flannerys. Get things ready for him. I'll drive you," he added, before she could protest. "I'll have Sophie start calling around. She's sure to locate Shan."

"It's not like Shan . . ." She heard Sophie say in the background, before the click of the receiver told her that Colt had hung up.

She got her bundles together—the plastic-wrapped sterile pack, and a black O.B. bag containing instruments and the ether. *They don't trust nurses* . . . Apprehension tingled through her, as Colt's words came back to her. Sue Ann Flannery was a multipara—a woman who had born more than one child. If Dr. Malone didn't hurry . . .

It took Colt Malone ten minutes to drive into town from the Triple M Ranch. He must have flown, she thought, letting him help her with the bundles, stuffing them into the rear of the small car. The Triple M was more than twenty miles from town. She tried not to think about it, as they left the small hospital. Colt's foot, en-

cased in a slim, square-toed boot pressed impatiently on the throttle.

The speedometer read sixty miles an hour when they left the outskirts of town. Another instant, and it had leaped ahead to seventy . . . eighty . . . ninety . . . one hundred. She tore her gaze away from the bold numerals to glance at the fine face of her nurse's watch. Nearly an hour had passed since Con Flannery had called. She wondered what could have happened to Dr. Malone. She agreed with Sophie Malone. It wasn't like him to stay away from the hospital so long, without having contacted her to let her know where he would be. Something must have happened . . .

There would be a great deal she could do when they arrived at the Flannery's. Prep the patient. Arrange a sterile field for Dr. Malone to work in . . .

The car was slowing. She glanced ahead to see two riders on the road. There was no mistaking the tresses of the girl—Smokey Denton astride a powerful looking animal whose glistening coat matched her own silvery beauty. The face of the man riding with the girl loomed at Tracey as they flashed by. Sonny Farrel, looking a little wan, still, beneath his broad-brimmed hat. The two waved. Colt lifted one big hand to them, in a casual gesture that was custom in the area.

"I wonder what mischief those two are up to?" he commented.

"Does it have to be mischief?" Tracey asked, trying not to look at the jittery, pointing finger of the speedometer, forcing down fear with a smile.

"What else is there around here for entertainment?" Colt said.

She saw the oasis of poplars bright against the blue hazed mountains in the distance, that would mark the site of a ranch.

"The Flannery's?" she asked.

Colt nodded.

Seconds later, they were pulling into a long dusty driveway. Two small planes were anchored in the endless expanse of close-bitten brown grass, to their right. Be-

yond the planes, cattle grazed, their flanks darkly wet in the late August heat.

The ranch house was small, crouched beneath the slim poplars as though it were a live thing searching out shade. An anxious faced man appeared on the shaded veranda; came running toward the small car, as Colt drew it to a stop feet from him.

Colt stepped from the car in one easy movement. "Con," he said, extending a brown hand.

"Where's Shan?" the rancher asked abruptly, taking the hand, shaking it dutifully.

"Out on a call. I've brought you a nurse. Tracey Talbot. She'll take care of Sue Ann until he gets here."

Con Flannery looked at her, his eyes betraying his concern. "How long will he be?" he asked.

"I couldn't contact him," Tracey admitted, letting Colt help her from the car, reaching back inside to retrieve her bag with its precious cargo.

"Tracey's a good nurse. The best," Colt said. "My brother's exact words. You can trust Shan's judgment, Con."

"He's still got the other one," Con Flannery said bitterly. "Sylvia West."

"A nurse takes her orders from the attending physician," Tracey told him.

His blue eyes seemed to relent a little. Out of desperation, Tracey thought. "Sue Ann's in here." He led her into the house.

Colt followed, the sterile bag dangling awkwardly from his hand.

Mrs. Flannery lay in a back bedroom—the poplars cast their long shadows on that part of the house. She rolled her head on a limp pillow to see who had entered, her eyes searching past Tracey, for, Tracey knew, some glimpse of Dr. Shannon Malone.

"He's not here, just yet," Tracey said quietly, calmly. "I'll take care of you, until he comes. Get you ready . . ."

"But he said he'd come," the woman said, almost listlessly. In another second, a pain gripped her. Tracey took the bundle from Colt, who stood in the doorway watch-

ing, his tanned face wearing an expression of detached curiosity. Con Flannery blanched visibly at his wife's agony. "Do something, for God's sake," he said, as Tracey urged the two gently from the room and closed the door. If Dr. Malone didn't make it, Colt would be the one capable of assisting her. She let the dread thought spin itself out into a plan. A nurse had to be prepared . . .

Sue Ann Flannery's face had taken on the pain-bloated expression familiar to all doctors and nurses. Her eyes bulged in their sockets; her lips, seeming suddenly gross and thick, spread back from straight white teeth. The spasm passed, and with it, the grotesquery of contorted facial muscles. She was a pretty woman, Tracey realized —gentian-eyed, blond-haired, and tan–faced, like everyone in the ranch country.

She found a towel, and wiped beads of perspiration from Sue Ann's face, after the contraction had passed. "We'll have a look to see how you're doing, as soon as I've scrubbed," she said.

She noted, as she went into the small bathroom, that the Flannery house was spotless. It wouldn't be too difficult to provide aseptic conditions for the birth. She remembered what her aunt and Colt had told her about the child who had become infected with virulent staph. They would be particularly concerned for this baby.

"We've waited a long time for another one," Mrs. Flannery told her, when she went back into the woman's room. "I don't want anything to go wrong." It was almost as though the anxious mother-to-be had read her mind. "Shan," Sue Ann added. "Are you sure . . . ?"

"I think you know as well as I that he'll be here, if humanly possible, for the arrival of your baby," Tracey said, her voice relaying a confidence she didn't feel. She thought again that it wasn't like Dr. Malone to be tardy. Not without getting a message to her, one way or another.

She examined her patient quickly, observing that as another contraction gripped her the perineum had begun to bulge. The contractions were "bearing down" in nature. It wouldn't be long. She laid out her razor and brought a

pan of warm water, rich with green soap, her slim hands working calmly, efficiently, in their preparation of the patient, seeming almost to have minds of their own, imbued by long months of rigorous training.

And a good thing, she found herself thinking. Because she was afraid. She had never delivered a baby alone, although one of the students in her nursing class had had that experience. A woman, being taken to the bank of O.B. rooms at Good Faith Hospital by elevator, had given birth between floors. It had seemed preposterous at the time. Almost funny. Now, Tracey found herself wishing that she had been the student nurse in charge of that particular patient. That bit of experience would have been better than none. Her own O.B. activities had been confined to the spacious immaculately gleaming delivery rooms, where neatly gowned, capped and masked doctors and nurses ushered in life. She felt suddenly isolated.

She forced down the feeling, drawing on her nurse's reserve of objectivity, trying to view her patient as mere flesh and blood, and the child-distorted abdomen, nameless, in need of care. She made another examination, timing the next contraction, knowing even before she finished that if Dr. Malone didn't arrive within the next ten minutes, it would be too late.

"The little rascal is getting anxious," she told Sue Ann, keeping her voice steady. As though she had been delivering babies all of her life . . . Surprisingly, the errant little thought gave her new courage. "He may not wait for Dr. Malone," she added, forcing a small confident smile. "I'm going to get you ready, now. Change the bed. Get the pads into place."

"You've . . . delivered babies before?" Mrs. Flannery asked.

Tracey nodded, turning to go scrub again, before the woman on the bed could ask, "how many."

Con Flannery hovered outside the doorway, his face set in worried lines. "Everything is progressing normally," Tracey told him. "Would you ask Colt to come here, please?"

"Why Colt?" Con asked. "It's Shan you need."

"I don't think Dr. Malone is going to make it," she said. The man had to know. "I'll need someone."

A stifled scream reached them from the improvised delivery room. "I see," Con Flannery said, looking totally defeated. As though he were going to be ill . . .

"For God's sake, Tracey," Colt hurried toward her, when she emerged from the small bathroom. "I'm no M.D."

"You've delivered foals." He had told her the day of the rodeo that he had stayed at home to attend to a mare.

"But that's different."

"I doubt it," she said. "Besides, I need you, Colt. I want you to scrub up to your elbows. You'll find soap and a brush in there." She gestured toward the bathroom. Then, as fear burst its confines, "Please hurry, Colt."

His turquoise eyes held hers for a brief moment. "I will," he said, with a quick grin. "I won't let you down."

The baby's head was visible at the vaginal orifice when Colt slipped into the hastily prepared room, that already smelled of birth. Another good contraction, Tracey thought, and the baby would emerge. She reached for a sterile towel, pressed it against the dark, crowning head. "Breath through your mouth," she told the straining woman. "Take deep, easy breaths."

Sue Ann tried to obey. Another contraction gripped her. And Tracey knew her order—an order that might have delayed birth perhaps long enough for Dr. Malone to arrive, if the contractions didn't come too close together—was lost on the wave of pain that contorted her patient's face and swollen body.

"God," Colt said beside her, his voice reverent for once. She glanced at his face, and saw by his eyes, that burned with shameless curiosity, that he was all right.

"Stand by," she told him. Then, as a second contraction gripped her patient. "Here he comes."

Flexion. Internal rotation. Extension. External rotation. The positional changes of the foetus, designed to facilitate birth, flashed through her mind. She realized with a flutter of surprise that her slim hands had accomplished the movements almost before the procedures became conscious with her. She supported the slippery, wet bit of hu-

manity with steady hands, keeping the child above the waste material that stained the bed pads. As the head and neck appeared, she noted that the membrane from the water sac covered the infant's face. If it wasn't torn, so the water could run out, the baby could strangle and drown.

"Take him," she gave Colt a swift, succinct order, felt his big arms reach past her own to relieve her hands of their slippery burden. "Don't pull," she warned him. With sure, efficient fingers, she freed the membrane, reaching again to receive the child, letting it emerge naturally, without tension.

The child was freed at last. She reached for another of the sterile towels, and wrapped it carefully around the tiny ankles, raising the lower part of the baby's body, letting the thick, blue cord dangle as she drained the amniotic fluid from the small throat and lungs.

Almost at once, the child cried. She glanced into Colt's curious eyes, and at the anxious mother, who was trying to raise herself to see. "A beautiful little son," she said, wrapping him quickly in the soft white blanket that had been part of the sterile pack, and laid him on his right side across Mrs. Flannery's abdomen.

"What about the cord?" Colt said, looking suddenly big and clumsy beside her, lacking totally his brother's refined, medical grace.

"It's not necessary to cut it immediately," she said. "I'll want a hot water bottle. He has to be kept warm."

Colt hurried out, leaving her to cope alone with the third stage of labor—the expulsion of the afterbirth. The slight contractions had already begun to expel the round, flat structure. There was some bleeding. Not too much, Tracey determined.

Colt returned with the prepared hot water bottle, Con Flannery following, white-faced, to view his son.

"The bottle will have to be covered," she told Colt. He was already reaching for towels, efficient, in his clumsy way.

"Wait until I tell Shan," he said.

Twenty minutes later, the birth had been completed, the placenta expelled, still attached by the cord to the in-

fant. Bleeding had increased, Tracey noticed with a tug of fear. She instructed Colt to bind the infant and placenta snugly together in a blanket, while she pressed pads into place in an effort to control the frightening flow.

"Press your legs together," she instructed her patient. Her slender hands reached to search through the relaxed muscles of Sue Ann's abdomen for the shape of the womb, massaging it, not stopping until it felt firm beneath the tips of her sensitive fingers.

There was still no sign of Dr. Malone. "If he doesn't come soon, I'll cut the cord and tie it," she told Colt.

"Will it harm him, to wait like this?" Con Flannery asked, reminding her of his frightened presence.

Tracey shook her head, forcing a smile, feeling suddenly tired. And worried about Dr. Malone . . .

Another fifteen minutes passed. She would have to act, she decided, going once more to scrub her hands. She tied the cord firmly four inches from the infant's navel, cutting it with the sharp scissors from the O.B. bag, on the placental side.

Colt and Tracey were outside, preparing to step into the apple-red car when Dr. Shan Malone finally appeared. Mrs. Flannery's mother, summoned from some distant ranch, had arrived shortly after Tracey had cut the baby's cord, to take charge of mother and child. "I've attended childbirth cases before," the older woman had assured her. "If we need you, we'll call." Tracey had glimpsed reluctance in all of the Flannery faces, born of the tragedy of their first child. Not that she blamed them, she thought. There had been a report in the papers of one of the dreaded nursery outbreaks of staph only the week before—an eastern hospital. Seven babies had died. They had inoculated the rest with a new vaccine composed of a non-virulent staph strain. There had been no further mention of deaths.

Dr. Malone stretched long, corduroy clad legs—he wore a trim, Western suit, made of gray corduroy, to the office—out of the sleek black car, and half ran toward them.

"Meet the new Dr. Malone," Colt called to him, grinning. "It's all over."

"You didn't . . ." Dr. Malone began, his face shocked.

"Of course not," Colt said. "Here's your girl. Tracey took over like a veteran. Brought the Flannery's a plump son."

Dr. Shannon Malone looked at her, his face happy and contrite at one and the same time. She looked into his eyes, thinking that it was difficult to tell their color in the late evening sunlight. They might have been brown, or green, with the long shadows of the poplars darkening his face.

"Tracey, I'm sorry." He leaned toward her a little. "Is everything all right?"

She nodded, aware that Colt was watching them, a peculiar grin covering his tanned features.

"Why don't you reward her, Shan?" he said. "I see the urge written all over your face."

"I'll attend to that in good time," Dr. Malone said. His eyes held hers, their depths glowing. In the next instant, he turned abruptly and disappeared into the house.

"The guy's falling for you," Colt told her, when they had started back toward town. "It's not too hard to do." He paused. "Say, he didn't tell us where he'd been all afternoon," he said. "We'll have to pin him down on that."

She only half heard him. The glow in Dr. Malone's eyes had been unmistakably desirous. If Colt Malone hadn't been present, she thought, Dr. Shannon Malone would have kissed her.

The idea pleased her more than a little.

12

DR. MALONE appeared in the doorway of his office, when she went on duty the following morning. "Tracey, may I see you for a moment?"

She entered his small leather and iodoform scented domain, thinking that the combination of aromas—ranch and medical—wasn't unpleasant. Thinking, too, that Dr. Malone, himself, was as rare as the rich scents that clung about him. She had never known an M.D. quite like him. Most of them dressed the part—neat dark business suits, white shirts, ties. Not that Dr. Malone wasn't immaculate in his Western flavored outfit—the slim-fitting corduroy trousers and yoked shirt, a green one, this day, with the black string tie dangling richly against it.

He was looking at her. "You did well yesterday," he said. "Con and Sue Ann asked me to thank you. It seems they were too overwhelmed, at the time. I'd hoped to be present for the big occasion. Can you forgive me?"

"Forgive?"

He stepped around the wide desk. She looked up into his eyes and saw that their depths were gold-flecked with some inner excitement. She felt her own heart pounding. In the next instant, he reached out and pulled her to him in a single gentle movement. She was acutely aware of the rich masculine smell of him—shaving lotion and green soap, and the expensive leather boots.

His lips, when they found her own, were firm, gentle. Not demanding in the way Colt's had been. Patient, she thought, with some remote part of her mind that stood aside to analyze. Then, suddenly, that part of her was ab-

sorbed, as she felt herself responding, enjoying that brief interlude in his arms, becoming a part of it. Not merely enduring . . .

He released her. "The reward Colt mentioned," he said. "My brother was correct about the urge."

There was a sound behind them. Someone cleared their throat. She glanced across his shoulder to see Sylvia West, her brown eyes burning in an intense white face.

"Yes, Sylvia?" Dr. Malone moved away, totally unruffled. As though he were accustomed to kissing a nurse every day in his office, Tracey thought. *Shan needed someone and you were there* . . . The expression in Sylvia's dark eyes seemed to repeat the words she had spoken to Tracey the day of the rodeo, when they had scrubbed together for the splenectomy.

Tracey turned, wondering how many times Sylvia had been kissed by the dark-haired doctor in exactly the same way, wishing, as she hurried from the room, that she hadn't responded: that it had been just a kiss—casual, relaxing, even, like the kisses the few interns she had dated at Good Faith Hospital had managed to snatch. She wondered, as she glanced through the cards on her desk, where Dr. Malone had gone yesterday. He still hadn't explained. Perhaps he wouldn't bother.

The morning passed swiftly. The usual number of patients, the men booted, wearing the inevitable faded jeans, their women surprisingly chic in tight fitting lady Levis, turned up in the waiting room, to be shown to Dr. Malone's office, or to the examination rooms that served the clinical portion of the small hospital. There were patients to be bathed, massaged, and fed, babies to attend to. Tracey seemed to be everywhere at once, encouraging, stepping in to take over some of the more menial tasks, when she glanced at her watch and saw that they were behind schedule. Thermometers . . . bedpans . . . medications . . . charts.

She was at her desk, bringing the cardex up to the present moment, when the telephone jangled. Urgently, she thought, with a nurse's perceptiveness. It rang again. She reached for it, a dark premonition coiling through her.

"Teal Lake Hospital."

"Is the doctor there?" A man's voice came to her, tremulous, frightened.

"He's busy at the moment," she said. Then, in kindly tones. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"Tammy's drunk sheep dip," the man stated. "She's doubled up."

"Can you get her to the hospital?"

"If I could, I'd be on my way now," the man said. "The truck's broke down . . ."

"Is there a neighbor?"

"Twenty miles off."

"Your name?" Tracey snatched a pencil and a pad.

"Shultz." The man spelled it out for her. It sounded familiar. The family whose cattle had been trespassing on Triple M range land . . .

"Now, Mr. Shultz, please read me the label on the dip."

It took him precious moments.

She hurried to Dr. Malone's office, the white slip in her hand, and stepped inside, her face anxious. "May I speak to you a moment, please, Doctor." No need to alarm the woman who sat beside the big desk.

"Of course." He arose, and followed her into the corridor.

"Tammy Shultz has swallowed sheep dip. Creosote." She recalled what Mr. Shultz had said, about his child being doubled up. "She's experiencing abdominal cramps."

"I told Gus to get that truck fixed. Living out like that . . ." Dr. Malone guessed that the man hadn't been able to bring the child in. "There's nothing to do but get out there. Take lavage equipment, antidotes, ten per cent ethyl alcohol, epinephrine, digitan." Then, "I could call Colt. Have him bring the plane. But there's no decent place to land out there, washes, gullies, lava. We'll have to drive."

It took her minutes to assemble the supplies they would need. The lavage equipment—the soft rubber stomach tube, and a one-quart container to hold the ten

per cent ethyl alcohol solution; a hypodermic to administer the digitan.

A last minute check, to be certain they had everything, and they were ready to go.

They followed the same gravel road that led to the Flying Flynn Ranch, and the Triangle M, beyond. A side road turned off, before they reached the fence line that marked the beginning of her aunt's holdings. It was a bumpy, alkali-dusted affair.

"Twenty miles of this," Dr. Malone told her. The little car gained momentum. She glanced at the speedometer. Sixty . . . Seventy. Eighty. If the car should skid in the gravel . . . Surprisingly, she felt no fear, as she had felt with Colt.

"I was out this way yesterday," Dr. Malone said. "There." He pointed, as they swirled past yet another of the narrow, single–track roads that lost themselves in the sage. Tracey glimpsed a weathered sign, pointing crookedly. White Maiden Spring. The sign looked as though it had been there for an eon. She wondered what business had taken Dr. Malone onto that neglected road. Rabbitbrush grew between rutted wheel tracks that seemed to disappear into a parched, dusty nowhere.

"I've been waiting for a chance to explain," Dr. Malone was saying. "Tom's dog stopped me back there by the main road."

She looked up at him, puzzled.

"The animal was totally beat, his feet bleeding. Sagebrush Tom was nowhere in sight. I knew instinctively that something had happened to the old man. When I stopped, the dog whined. Looked at me with that begging expression dogs have. He limped off toward White Maiden Spring. I found his bloodied tracks, in the alkali and knew I was onto something." He gave her a look. "Tom had cut himself with his axe, while he was out gathering those big hunks of sage he uses for the carvings. He'd lost some blood. But he'll make it. I patched up the foot. Got him fixed up as comfortable as a man can be, under makeshift circumstances. He's staying in the shack at White Maiden Spring, waiting for autumn. The ghost," he

added. "Tom refused to come back to town with me. There was no way to let you know."

She smiled, not quite knowing what to say.

"He offered to pay me," Dr. Malone continued, "with one of his carvings. I remembered that you liked his White Maiden. I held out for another just like her." His hazel eyes, definitely the soft, shadowed shade of a quiet summer brook, now, with no trace of green, sought her own for a brief instant.

She sat beside him, touched and speechless. When words finally came, they sounded mundane.

"That was thoughtful of you, Doctor."

His eyes left the road again, for a burning instant. "I didn't do it to be thoughtful," he said.

"Why did you do it?" she heard herself asking, boldly.

He glanced at her again. "Because I think I am falling in love with you," he said, his wonderful, mellifluous voice firm, as matter-of-fact as though he had mentioned the weather.

There was no time to try to reply, even if the right words had formed themselves. The Shultz place rose out of the dust before them, a squat, gray dwelling huddled against the barren desert without shade. They came to an abrupt halt in the gray yard. Tracey glimpsed lank cattle in the distance and a huddle of sheep.

A stick-thin man stepped out of the house, and hurried toward them. Tracey noticed that his hands were shaking, and remembered that he was a shell-shock victim. "In here," he urged them toward the colorless building.

"Do you have any idea how much sheep dip she drank?" Dr. Malone's voice remained calm. "It will help if you can tell me." He bent over the tiny figure lying on a ragged couch.

Gus Shultz shook his head.

"If you have a clean blanket, or sheet, we can put under her . . ." Dr. Malone lifted the child and went with her toward the table that set beneath a grimy window. Mrs. Shultz, a thin, nervous woman, hurried to clear away salt and pepper cellars; a sugar bowl, with flies buzzing around it.

That the family was deprived was obvious to Tracey.

She found herself wondering how they managed; why they bothered to cling to the dusty ranch, as she spread a towel, and arranged the supplies they would use. She worked swiftly, locating the carefully wrapped esophageal tube in the extra bag they'd packed. The glass connection was still intact. She glanced around for a refrigerator. They would need ice, to chill the soft tube; stiffen it for easier passage. There seemed to be none.

"We'll manage," Dr. Malone told her, arranging the child's body on the threadbare sheet Mrs. Shultz brought.

She laid out a funnel and prepared the ten per cent ethyl alcohol solution. They would administer it at 105 degrees. Glycerine to facilitate passage of the rubber tubing. Emesis basin. Her soft lips repeated the items silently, as she worked—towels, a rubber sheet.

Dr. Malone arranged Tammy Shultz's small body in a horizontal recumbent position. Tracey reached to take her pulse, feeling the cold clamminess of the little girl's skin. Her trained mind yielded the symptoms of phenol poisoning; the cresols, sheep dip, belonged in that category. The characteristic odor was present, smelling like all of the things Tracey had ever been near that had been treated with creosote—the piles of the big piers that jutted out into the Willamette, new telephone poles, one of the ranchers she had brushed against at the rodeo. Maybe it had been Gus Shultz. She hadn't noticed.

Abdominal pain. The little girl's face was racked with it, although she made no sound. The child was hardly breathing. Depressed respiration. She identified that particular symptom with a little feeling of dread.

Dr. Malone was scrubbing in a basin the woman had brought. The house seemed to be devoid of plumbing. A rickety windmill creaked somewhere outside, the breeze barely stirring it. He came, his green sleeves rolled up on his clean arms. The little girl's face was livid. Her arms and legs as cold as death.

"She ain't . . . ?" the mother began.

"We'll take care of her," Dr. Malone said gently. "If you want to step outside. I'll call you, when we've done what we have to do."

"Will she . . . ?" The woman's voice cracked.

All they needed now was a case of hysterics, Tracey thought, silently willing the mother to leave without a fuss. By some miracle, she did, letting Gus Shultz take her arm, and guide her through the narrow door out into the blazing sunlight. She saw them through the window, hovering nearby.

"Epinephrine," Dr. Malone said. "Intravenously."

She prepared the hypodermic, aware that Dr. Malone was inserting the too-soft lavage tube, managing it, with the glycerin to act as a lubricant. The intravenous injection was ready. Two cc's. She sterilized the inner area of the child's elbow and wrapped a tourniquet around it. The small blue vein bulged. She inserted the needle with a deft movement, pointing it upward, loosening the tourniquet with her free hand before she applied pressure to the plunger. Then, slowly, slowly, injecting the stimulant. Adrenalin, they had called it, at Good Faith Hospital.

She didn't realize that she had said the word aloud, until she heard Dr. Malone's soft voice. "We don't call it that here," he said, managing a quick, tension–easing smile. "Adrenalin is something a rancher shoots into the jugular of a cow when she's down with milk fever."

His words eased her fear for the child. She withdrew the needle, and pressed the cotton ball, saturated with seventy per cent alcohol into place . . . and watched the small face. The child was too thin. A blond little thing, with dark lashes fanning her cheeks. Tammy—the name seemed to fit.

Dr. Malone continued to flush the tiny stomach. The solution had lost its smokey tinge and was returning clear now. Tracey breathed a sigh, noting a splotch of color spreading across the child's cheek.

"She didn't drink too much of the stuff," Dr. Malone said. "Sheep dip's not particularly appetizing, even to a hungry child."

Tracey glanced around the small, mean room. "How can they make it?" she said.

"Gus managed to get some good stock on credit. The cattle, at any rate. I wouldn't know about the sheep. If

they can squeak by for a year or two, things should look up."

Everything in ranch country was long range, she thought. A person had to look ahead, to a nebulous future. She found herself wondering, as she encouraged the small child, whose eyelids had begun to flutter, what her own future in the "yonder" country held. She hadn't committed herself to stay forever. Although the strange, barren country seemed to grow on her. She could see beauty in the broad pastel expanses.

They worked together, over the child, massaging the small, pipestem legs, applying heat, necessary in spite of the glancing rays of the sun outside. Tracey was acutely aware of Dr. Malone's tall, sturdy presence beside her, as she leaned near him, brushing his tan arm, feeling the heat generated by his body; the vitality of him.

Tammy Shultz moved her head, strangling on the tube, trying to retch. "You're going to be all right, sweetheart," Dr. Malone comforted her, withdrawing the tube.

"How is she?" Mrs. Shultz's thin outline appeared in the doorway.

"We've emptied her stomach," Dr. Malone said. "She'll need to be kept quiet now, and warm." His sensitive hands kept up a rhythmic massage, their tanned virileness emphasized by the ashen color of the child's skin.

"Mama," Tammy said.

The mother rushed forward, with a little cry.

"I'll call Krig." Dr. Malone went to the wall telephone. "We'll want to keep her under observation."

"The hospital?" Mrs. Shultz asked.

Dr. Malone nodded.

"But we can't . . ." The too-thin, trembling husband stood in the doorway.

"Don't worry about it," Dr. Malone said.

They waited for Krig Bales to arrive. Rose Calahan rode beside him in the front of the ambulance, her freckled face pleasant beneath the wings of her nurse's cap. Tracey glanced at Dr. Malone, her face questioning.

"I'm going out to the spring to check on Tom, on the way back," he told her. "I'm taking you with me. You've

worked hard these past couple of weeks. It's time you had a little outing."

"The poor darling." Rose had caught sight of the child. She hovered over Tammy Shultz, her face expanding in a typical Irish smile, as she wrapped a blanket around her, and helped Krig Bales slide her onto the stretcher. Tracey, busy cleaning up, noticed the look Krig gave the pert nurse, and wondered about it. Krig Bales was single. So was Rose. She smiled at the thought, telling herself that she was getting as bad as her Aunt Cory!

She reached to help Dr. Malone pack his bag, aware that Rose Calahan had turned to give her a quick glance. She found herself blushing, beneath Rose's frank Irish gaze, as she remembered the kiss Dr. Malone had given her. Both of the Malones, Colt and Shannon, had a way about them, she found herself thinking. It would be difficult for a girl to choose.

13

THEY DROVE at a leisurely pace along the dusty little road that led to White Maiden Spring. It would have been suicide, Tracey thought, to drive any other way. The road was narrow, overgrown, rutted, as though it hadn't been used in a hundred years.

"It hasn't," Dr. Malone told her, when she put the thought into words. "Not publicly. A few hunters find their way back in here during the fall hunting season. And an occasional couple spooning." He flashed her a knowing grin. "The spring is isolated. There's no reason for anyone to go out there."

They drove in silence. The yellow-gray valley floor, scarred with sage and bitterbrush spread around them. Ragged, dark rocks splotched the pale earth. Lava rocks, Tracey thought, spewed, in the long distant past, by some towering cinder cone. It seemed impossible that water trickled from the earth, somewhere in that desert wilderness.

"Another five miles," Dr. Malone told her, when she asked how far it was to the spring. "Believe it or not, there is lush grass there. And just ahead, off to the left, an old water hole." He pointed. She glimpsed green, beyond the fringe of yellow-blooming rabbitbrush. And, surprisingly, grazing animals—horses, three of them, one a shining silver statue in the sun. She had seen it before.

"Smokey Denton's," Dr. Malone said, surprise covering his face. He lifted the lid to the compartment between the bucket seats, and took out binoculars, stopping the car, lifting them to his eyes. "The other mounts belong to

the Farrel spread. And the Triple M. Sonny and Colt," he added. "The three musketeers. I had no idea they still played Indians out here." He adjusted the glasses, grinning sheepishly. "I used to sneak over here with them when we were all kids. I was older—the chief." He put the binoculars back, and the car leaped ahead, spinning up a new cloud of dust. "Too bad Shultz can't graze his herd around that waterhole for a few days. It would fatten them up. Get them into condition for winter. We have some doozies over here—flank-deep snow, icicles. Not like your Portland drizzles." He gave her a good–natured grin.

Another twenty minutes, and the green fronds of water willows came into view, a lush thicket of them crowding an arroyo. Cottonwood and aspen towered above them, their leaves shimmering. Water trickled, forming a miraculously blue pool.

"White Maiden Spring," Dr. Malone announced. "The waterhole back there where the three musketeers are rendezvousing dries up in early September. Most of the springs in this country do. All except White Maiden. The water stays clear and pure here. A fitting setting for the bridal ghost."

Dr. Malone cut the motor of the car, and they stepped out into crystallized silence.

"It's eerie," Tracey said. The still air seemed to gather up the sound of her voice, absorbing it, before it could echo back to her.

"A little," Dr. Malone admitted. "Tom's over here. Along this path."

They walked through knee-high grass, toward twisted juniper that grew on a rise above the spring. The remnants of a cabin became visible between the distorted trees. "Those same trees were here when the White Maiden lived." Dr. Malone gestured with his bag. "Christ, for that matter. They're rare. The oldest living things."

"They're beautiful," Tracey said, unable to throw off the sense of unreality that gripped her.

Sagebrush Tom's dog danced toward them, from beyond the junipers, barking. Seconds later, the old man

emerged, hobbling on a wad of dirty rags. "The bandages are clean underneath," Dr. Malone was quick to explain. "Or they were, when I left him, yesterday."

The old man greeted them, a piece of golden sage wood clutched in one gnarled hand. Tracey glimpsed the folds of an old-fashioned dress taking form in the wood, and knew that it was to be another White Maiden carving —the one Dr. Malone had asked for.

"How's the foot, Tom?" Dr. Malone seated the old man on a rock, and stooped to unravel the rags. Surprisingly, white gauze came into view, a spot of dried blood marking the site of the wound.

Tracey knelt beside him, opening the bag, taking out fresh gauze and a tube of antibiotic salve. Somewhere in the distance, a sheep bleated. The dog, that had lingered nearby, his ears cocked, turned and loped away in the direction of the sound.

"You see her yet, Tom?" Dr. Malone asked, his hazel eyes intent on the wound, that, Tracey saw, had been expertly sutured.

"It's too soon," Tom said. "She won't come until October. As soon as the leaves start to turn. That's when she'll come."

The old man believed that there was a White Maiden, Tracey thought. Enough to fashion her likeness from the golden, daintily flecked Oregon sage . . .

They walked beneath the shimmering trees, when they had finished with the old man's foot. Dr. Malone took her hand.

"There's where she appears." He pointed to a spot beyond the lucid pool. The seed heads forming on the grass that grew on the far side leaned undisturbed toward the crystal water.

"Why doesn't some rancher, your brother, perhaps, or even Aunt Cory, graze this area?" Tracey asked.

"It's not open range," Dr. Malone said. "Most of us own enough grazing land of our own. Those who don't, truck their stock to the high range every spring. Round them up out of the mountains every fall. Shultz will have to do that, to make a go of it. And there are one or two others, with just a patch."

"But, all of this going to waste . . ."

"Tom's sheep are enjoying it," he reminded her.

"It's not open range . . ."

"Tom goes where he pleases, regardless of the law," Dr. Malone said. "An old desert rat's privilege. This entire valley is Tom's range. No one protests. There aren't many characters like Tom left. None that I know of, other than Tom, who has retained enough naieveté to see the White Maiden." He gave her a look. "She doesn't appear for just anyone." Then, in a lighter vein, "She might for you, if you'd care to come, when those cottonwoods and aspens turn."

He had caught her off guard. "I . . ." She paused, wanting to be totally honest, with the dark–haired, warm–eyed man beside her. "Colt has already asked me," she said.

"Competition." His face was inscrutable. "There's nothing that says you can't come more than once." He stopped, turning toward her, placing his hands on her shoulders. "Is there?"

She shook her head.

"It's settled, then. When the first leaf turns gold." He bent his head and kissed her gently on the mouth.

14

LITTLE TAMMY SHULTZ recovered. And Sagebrush Tom. Tracey had gone with Dr. Malone once more to attend to the old sheepherder's foot. The eerie green oasis that was White Maiden Spring fascinated her, as did the surrounding country that seemed void of any life, other than the long-eared jackrabbits, and an occasional antelope. She found herself looking forward to the time when the leaves would turn, and she could spend a day there with Colt. And with Dr. Shan Malone.

She glanced out of her bedroom window, and saw the first tinge of bronze on the far-reaching stretches of the valley. It was the middle of September. She had been director of Nursing Services at Teal Lake Hospital for nearly two months. And had loved every minute of it, she admitted to herself. She had told her mother and father so, in the last letter that she had written home. She had told them, too, that she intended to stay in the eastern Oregon "yonder" country, at least until spring. She needed the experience she was gaining at the small hospital. That had been her excuse.

But, she admitted to herself now, as she slipped into cream-colored riding pants, there was more to it than that. She enjoyed the people in the big upland valley—the Malones. Colt had invited her to spend the day at the Triple M. They were branding calves, he'd said, out on the range. He had made that dusty, noisy task sound exciting.

She had just finished buttoning her trim Western shirt,

when the powerful purr of his red sports car sounded in the lane.

"Tracey." Cory Flynn's voice came to her, tinged with disapproval. Her aunt had made no effort to hide her doubts about the youngest of the Malone brothers during the past few weeks. "Colt's got a mean streak in him," Cory had said. "I'll have to admit that his personality is terrific. I've yet to meet a Malone who couldn't charm his way to any woman's heart. But Colt . . . There's something about him. It's hard to put your finger on. But it's there."

Tracey had remembered the incident involving Sagebrush Tom and his sheep; the way Colt had speeded toward the small, woolly band, not caring. She had sensed that "mean streak" in Colt, and, perversely, it had seemed to add to his rakish appeal.

She hurried down the stairway, a fringed jacket draped across one arm. There was to be a barbecue when the day's work was finished. Her aunt met her at the foot of the stair.

"I'll be over later to help Sophie with the food," Corry said. "Do be careful, dear. You aren't accustomed to . . ."

"To dashing young men, in Levis, who charm damsels with their flashing eyes," Tracey said, a teasing smile crinkling the corners of her mouth. "Shan's going to be there, too," she added. "Unless someone breaks a leg and calls him." She darted out of the doorway as Colt brought the small car to a halt at the foot of the veranda steps.

He smiled up at her, his eyes bright beneath the brim of his Stetson, his white teeth gleaming in his brown face. His was a purely physical appeal, she thought. He was lean and healthy, invitingly so, like one of his blooded horses—a fine specimen of a man. She smiled a little at the thought, as she climbed into the bucket seat beside him. He smelled not unpleasantly of soft, creaking leather, horses, sweat.

"I've been up and at it since four o'clock this morning," he told her. "I thought ten o'clock would never come."

She smiled in appreciation of the backhanded compli-

ment. "I might have made it earlier, except that a nurse likes to sleep in on her day off. It's a luxury."

"Promise you'll forget the starched white business for awhile." He glanced at her, his eyes reflecting displeasure in a smiling face. The effect was almost chilling.

"A nurse never forgets that she's a nurse," she told him, unable to deny her profession, in spite of the fact that she wanted to please him.

"Just this once," he said. "For me."

"Unless something comes up, and I'm needed," she conceded.

"I guess I'll have to settle for that."

Dr. Shannon Malone's sleek black car was parked in the bare patch of yard before the sprawling Triple M ranchhouse. Tracey glimpsed a bright-winged plane tied down in the field to the right of the house. Dr. Malone hadn't been called to the hospital to handle some unforeseen emergency, she thought, an unexpected little thrill of gladness tingling through her. She realized that she had been looking forward to spending the day with him, as well as with Colt. The Malones were pleasant to be with, including Bras and his plump, soft-spoken wife, Sophie.

Colt led her toward sleek sorrel horses, saddled and tied to an old-fashioned hitching rail near the house. There was no sign of Dr. Malone as they mounted and rode off across the endless expanse of dry fall grass toward a little smudge of smoke in the distance.

Men and bawling cattle mingled in the puff of alkali dust that rose from threshing hooves. Tracey glimpsed Dr. Malone's well-muscled figure among them, his legs looking long in slim jeans, his roll-brimmed hat a little battered, shading his eyes. He wore leather gloves, as he reached for a smoking iron, and plunged it against the russet-colored rump of the calf in the branding chute. Thank goodness, she thought, remembering the soft, supple sensitiveness of his surgeon's hands. The other men were bare-handed, their knuckles grimed, their palms calloused. The gloves, she noted, were Dr. Malone's only concession to his profession, as he worked, perspiration darkening his faded shirt across chest and shoulders.

Colt reached to take one of the long-handled branding

irons off of the pile of smoldering wood—old fence posts, Tracey noted—and went to the opposite side of the chute. With a harsh, plunging motion, he planted the iron on the calf's opposite hip. The calf bawled.

"What's the big idea, Colt?" Dr. Malone shouted at him, unaware of Tracey's presence.

"Two Triple M marks are better than one," Colt shouted back at him.

"That wasn't necessary," Dr. Malone said.

Colt swaggered toward Tracey, seeming not to have heard. Dr. Malone turned and saw her. He nodded, his hands still occupied with the long-handled branding iron, his eyes suddenly bright in the shadow of his hat brim. Colt unsaddled her horse throwing the gear on the ground, arranging the saddle for her to sit on, spreading the saddle blanket over it.

"You can see the whole show from here," he said.

She found herself enjoying the scene before her, in spite of the acrid smell of too many cattle, penned in the corral at the base of the branding chute, and the stifling dust that rose in a gray cloud, to mingle with the smoke from the fire. It was a totally masculine scene, filled with sweating, swearing, booted men, their tan faces grayed a little by the dust. She found herself comparing the Malone brothers, Shan and Colt. Dr. Shannon Malone was taller than Colt, his body tapered neatly from his sturdy, broad shoulders to the tips of his dusty boots. Colt stood like a boulder, husky all over, his frame almost bulky beside his brother's. She found herself watching their faces. Dr. Malone worked methodically, his expression objective, as he plunged the white-hot iron against the heaving rumps. His eyes, she noted, were intent, gauging precisely where to strike with the pain-rending weapon.

She glanced at Colt, catching her breath at the expression on his face as he wielded his iron. His white teeth flashed in his dust-grayed face. He was smiling, she thought, with a little shock, as he plunged the star-shaped brand against solid flesh. There was a strange intensity about him, as though he enjoyed the bawling cries of pain.

A puff of dust caught her attention, beyond the chute.

An old truck humped its way across the rough terrain, inching toward them.

"It's Shultz," one of the men yelled, "Wonder what he wants?"

The thin nervous man parked the truck and came toward them, his eyes shaded by a felt hat that looked worn and greasy. "Any of you fellows seen my stock?" he asked.

"You missing a few head?" Bras Malone stepped forward, taking cigarettes from his shirt pocket, offering the pack, sticking one between his own dust-parched lips.

"Close to a dozen," Gus Shultz said, his Adam's apple bobbing in a neck almost ludicrously long. He looked deprived, unwell, Tracey thought, as though he might go all to pieces any minute, in the way the shell-shocked did.

"What made you think we'd know anything about them?" Colt stepped forward, his handsome face belligerent. "To come on a man's spread, in these parts, asking about missing stock is the same as accusing . . ."

"Colt," Dr. Malone said quietly. "I'll handle this." He turned to the thin man. "When did you miss them, Gus?"

"This morning," Gus Shultz said. "They could have been gone longer. They've been grazing the south end of my forty. It's quite a ways from the house. I ain't got me a horse, yet."

"Did you see where they got out? Tracks?" Dr. Malone asked.

"The fence was down. Looked like it had been deliberately trampled. I suppose the cattle could have done it. I lost the tracks in rocky ground."

"They could be anywhere, Gus," Dr. Malone said. "The grass is still pretty good on the foothills. And there's water."

"I'll keep looking," Gus Shultz said helplessly, turning back to his truck, with slumped shoulders.

Pity for the inadequate looking man surged through Tracey. Why didn't they offer to help . . . ?

Dr. Malone followed him, laying a sympathetic hand on Gus's thin shoulder. "I'll get the boys out, when we finish here," he said. "We'll check the water holes first, then work up toward the hills."

"I'll go," Colt said, surprisingly. "You don't need me here." He glanced at Tracey. "The dust is getting thick. How about going back to the house. You can chat with Sophie."

She nodded agreement, not missing the strange look both Bras and Dr. Malone gave their younger brother.

"This isn't like you, Colt," Dr. Malone murmured.

"I'm sick of the stink of burning hair," Colt said, tossing the saddle on Tracey's mare, pulling the cinch tight.

"Let him go, Shan," Bras Malone said. "He's been restless lately. Hunting strays will take some of the vinegar out of him."

The rest of the day passed pleasantly and, miraculously, without a single call for Dr. Malone. Colt had gone on horseback to help Gus Shultz, riding in the dust behind the old truck, leading a spare mount for Gus.

"I'd like to spend all of my days off duty like this," Tracey said to Sophie Malone. They were seated in the big pleasant kitchen over cups of coffee. A lunch had been sent out to the branding crew at noon, loaded into the back of a ranch wagon—gallons of strong coffee, and heaps of thick sandwiches, pie, cake. The ranch handyman, a dusky Indian boy, who seemed to be a jack-of-all-trades, delivered the food and returned with the big empty pots; the sandwiches reduced to a few crumbs clinging to the spotless dish towels Sophie had used to wrap them.

"Marry a rancher, and you can spend all of your days like this," Sophie Malone said, contentedly.

"I could never give up my profession," Tracey told her.

"That limits the field, then," Sophie said.

To Dr. Shannon Malone. She hadn't spoken the words, but Tracey read the meaning in Sophie's kind eyes. Sophie Malone must have been talking to Cory Flynn, Tracey found herself thinking.

In the next instant, the telephone jangled, interrupting the quiet tranquility of the fragrant kitchen.

"Hello. Yes. Yes, he's here."

Tracey knew, even before Sophie hung up, that the call was for Dr. Malone.

"The hospital?" she asked.

"Mrs. Shultz," Sophie said. "It's Gus . . ."

"But he was here," Tracey glanced at her watch, "less than three hours ago."

"I know," Sophie said. "I saw him come. And go, with Colt fast on his tail, riding hell bent for leather like he does."

"What happened?" Tracey asked.

"The horses dragged him. Colt's, and the extra one he took along for Gus to ride," Sophie said. "Gus wasn't able to say how it happened, when Colt brought him in."

Tracey went to the telephone and dialed. They would need the ambulance. "Send Krig out to Shultz's," she told Sylvia West. The dark-eyed nurse was in charge during Tracey's off-duty hours. "And set up in emergency. Gus Shultz has been dragged by horses." Sylvia was a "yonder" country girl. She would know what had to be done. There would be abrasions, and broken bones . . .

She hung up and turned to Sophie. They would have to go out to the branding chutes after Dr. Malone.

"The station wagon," Sophie said. "The keys are in it."

Precious moments bounced by as they made their way across the rough grazing land toward the puff of dust and smoke. Dr. Malone saw them coming, and dropped his long-handled branding iron to run toward them, in long, easy strides.

"It's Gus," Tracey told him, explaining briefly what had happened.

He climbed under the wheel, thrusting her aside with his hard body. She was acutely aware of his strength; the steamy, masculine warmth of him beside her, as they reeled at a crazy angle, in a short, sharp turn, and bounced in a cloud of alkali back to the house.

They transferred quickly to the sleek, black car, and roared away, leaving Sophie standing in the yard, her kind face anxious.

The identical dusty miles slid by. They passed the White Maiden Spring turn-off in a cloud of dust that wasn't quite thick enough to obscure the two riders galloping along that narrow, deserted road. Smokey Denton,

and Sonny Farrel, Tracey thought, recognizing the silver-colored horse.

"Ten to one, they've fixed up a place to practice somewhere on that lonesome stretch," Dr. Malone said.

"Their rodeo act?" Tracey asked.

Dr. Malone nodded. "They have to go somewhere, so Bull won't know. White Maiden road is as good a place as any."

The two horses Colt had taken from the Triple M stood, lathered, before the Shultz shack. Blood stained the tooled leather saddle still cinched around the heaving sides of one of the animals. Tracey viewed it with apprehension. If Gus had lost that much blood . . .

Dr. Malone hurried toward the scabby little building, looking more like a rancher than a doctor, unless you noticed his hands. He pushed open the door and stepped inside with Tracey close behind him.

Gus Shultz lay on the sagging couch in one corner of the room, his pale wife bent over him. Colt sat nearby, in a chair that had stuffing spilling from a hole in the arm. He arose when they entered, his eyes bright, his lips pulling back from his white teeth in a strange grimace that was almost a grin.

"I did what I could, Shan," he said.

"O.K., kid." Dr. Malone pushed past him to crouch beside the wounded man, balancing on the balls of his feet, his lean hips resting on the high heels of his boots. Tracey knelt beside him, reaching for Gus Shultz's arm, trying to determine the extent of the man's external injuries, without inwardly flinching. She had never seen a man who had been dragged by horses.

His body had scraped over rocks, jagged rocks, and brush—the harsh sage and cruel bitterbrush. Brush burns —that type of injury had been described in her medical dictionary. She remembered having seen it.

Mrs. Shultz had spread a tattered sheet across her husband's denuded body. Body fluids seeped through the limp white cloth.

The door opened behind them. "You don't need me here," Colt said. The door closed, before anyone could reply. Tracey was only half-aware of the sound of horses'

hooves pounding the packed yard outside as Colt rode off.

Minutes later, Krig Bales arrived, and they laid Gus Shultz carefully in the ambulance. Dr. Malone climbed in to sit beside him, his slim fingers delving into his medical bag, preparing a hypo, even as the long vehicle pulled away.

Mrs. Shultz stood twisting her hands in a faded apron, watching it go. "Trouble," she said. "Trouble."

"Come on," Tracey said gently. Then, "Where's Tammy?" She hadn't noticed the thin little girl.

"I sent her to my people," Mrs. Shultz said. "Until things get better."

Tracey helped the distraught woman into Dr. Malone's black sports car, and got in beside her. The key was in the ignition. She started the engine, and it leaped ahead, following the ambulance along the narrow, dusty road, past the twin wheel tracks of the White Maiden Springs road. Tracey glimpsed three riders against the sky, followed by a loose horse, in the direction of the spring. Colt had joined his friends. The three musketeers seemed to like that particular area, she thought, remembering what Dr. Malone had called them.

"He knew Gus is no horseman," Mrs. Shultz said beside her.

Tracey glanced at the pale woman. "Do you know what happened?"

"I didn't see it," the woman said.

"Didn't Colt say?"

"He asked Gus to hold the horses, while he got off to look for a cattle sign," Mrs. Shultz said.

"But . . ."

"Gus was standing between them, holding onto the bridles. He . . . Colt said something scared them. First thing he knew, they were running, dragging Gus. He'd got his hand tangled, somehow, in the reins." She paused. "Colt knew Gus is no horseman," she repeated.

He's got a mean streak in him . . . The statement Cory Flynn had made about Colt Malone came into Tracey's mind.

"Colt couldn't have known the horses would bolt," she blotted it out with words.

"Those reins were tied around my man's wrist," Mrs. Shultz said. "I saw the marks."

15

TRACEY found her eyes drawn to Gus Shultz's scraped wrists when she entered the emergency room at Teal Lake Hospital. The mark of the reins was there, burned into the bruised flesh, as though . . . She tried to stop the thought, but it spun itself out in her mind. As though the reins had been knotted into place . . .

A chill ran down her spine, as she reached for antiseptic, and began the tedious job of removing foreign bodies from the painful red denuded areas of Gus Shultz's body. Dr. Malone worked at the foot of the table, examining Gus's legs, discovering, she knew, by the expression on his face, that bones had been shattered. Miss West entered with a Baxter bottle, and raised her arms to fit it into the bracket. Her hands trembled suddenly, and it fell crashing.

"Krig." Dr. Malone glanced at the anesthetist, who stood near the head of the table watching the blood pressure gauge.

Krig Bales moved at once to get a new bottle of dextran and fitted it efficiently into place. Had they been assembled at Good Faith Hospital, Tracey found herself thinking, Sylvia West would have received a harsh reprimand from the physician in charge. Carelessness simply wasn't tolerated. Sylvia West gave Dr. Malone a look. Gratitude, Tracey analyzed it.

The contined to work as though nothing had happened, stepping aside when the hospital housekeeper entered with a broom and mop to remove the mess.

"Gentian violet, five per cent," Dr. Malone ordered, when she had cleansed the wounds.

She worked in silence, applying the soothing dressing with conscientious fingers, acutely aware of Dr. Malone's calm presence beside her, as he moved to examine Gus Shultz's thoracic area and the badly burned wrist.

"We'll bind these. Sterile gauze," he said. "And penicillin." He paused. "Colt knew better."

Sylvia West was still at the hospital that evening, when they dared to leave Gus Shultz. The blood plasma extender had helped combat shock, and the patient had rallied. It would take days for the brush burns and broken bones to heal. But he would make it, Dr. Malone told Mrs. Shultz, his voice confident.

It was dark when they started for the Flying Flynn. The moon, a thin, white sickle above the dark rim of mountains, cast a faint light, illuminating the long stretch of road. Tracey glimpsed headlights coming toward them, still miles off. The car slowed, when it grew nearer, its lights blinking. Dr. Malone applied the brakes on his small car, bringing it to a skidding halt in the loose gravel.

"You seen Sonny, Shan?" Tracey recognized Bull Farrel's booming voice.

"Earlier today, Bull," Dr. Malone told him. "I saw him riding out toward the Shultz place."

"With the Denton girl." It was more statement than question.

"Colt was with them," Dr. Malone said. "Gus Shultz lost a few head of cattle. Colt offered to try to round them up. No doubt he recruited Sonny and Smokey."

"I hear Shultz got roughed up a little."

"Horses dragged him," Dr. Malone said. "He'll make it, though. He's tougher than he looks."

"Maybe he'll pull stakes and get out, now," Bull Farrel said. "A man in Shultz's position can't stand to lose cattle. It ain't like you and me, Shan. We lose maybe twenty, thirty head a year, to the coyotes, both two and four-legged, and never miss them. Shultz can't stand the pressure."

"Can't they be found?" Tracey asked.

"Somebody might run onto them, accidentally," Bull Farrel told her. "But it don't pay to get up a posse for a dozen head of cattle. This is big country, girl. Mighty big country." With that, he put his car into gear, and drove on.

Colt was waiting for them when they arrived at the Flying Flynn, slumped in a deep chair in the big living room, talking to Cory.

"I've heard Colt's version of the accident," Cory Flynn said, when Dr. Malone guided Tracey inside, his hand firm at her elbow. "Now, Shan, how about yours?"

"It will take awhile," Dr. Malone said. "But Gus will get back on his feet again. Physically, at any rate." He looked at his younger brother, his eyes questioning. "Colt?"

"Hell, Shan. I couldn't help it," Colt said. "All I did was ask him to hang onto the reins while I scouted for signs."

"Jeff Riggs was killed last year, leading two horses. You haven't forgotten that," Dr. Malone said.

"No. But this was different. There wasn't an electric current to panic them."

Cory Flynn glanced at Tracey. "Jeff Riggs was leading the animals along his driveway. It had been raining, and there was some kind of short in the power lines. The juice had spread into the ground around a pole. When the horse's feet touched it . . . Jeff's hand got tangled in the halter ropes. It's happened to more than one man, caught between two frightened animals, when they panic like that."

"What frightened them, Colt?" Dr. Malone asked, his hazel eyes unwavering.

"Rattler, I suppose." Colt shrugged his shoulders, taking out a little drawstring tobacco pouch and a brown slip of paper. He concentrated on his busy fingers.

"Any sign of Gus's cattle?"

"None," Colt said. "They're not out in that area. Must have headed for the high country." Colt glanced at Tracey. "You up to a night on the town?" he asked, changing the subject abruptly.

"I think not," she said. "It's been a long day."

"O.K." He shrugged again, seeming restless. "Another time, then." He went toward the door. Tracey received the distinct impression that he wanted to get away from Dr. Malone's clear, all-seeing gaze.

She stepped out onto the veranda with Dr. Malone when he arose to leave ten minutes later. The two of them were alone in the endless expases of the desert night.

"Were you really tired, or did you turn down Colt's invitation for a reason?" Dr. Malone's abrupt question startled her.

"I . . . I don't quite know what you mean," she said.

"I want you to be my girl," he told her, his mellifluous voice rich with meaning. "I thought perhaps you'd sensed it. And maybe liked the idea a little."

She had sensed an attraction between them, different from the excitement Colt's husky, healthy good looks aroused in her. She liked Dr. Shannon Malone better than she liked Colt, she realized. Dr. Malone was a handsome man, with his changeable hazel eyes that reflected a warmth that Colt seemed to lack. It wouldn't be difficult to love Dr. Shannon Malone, not only because he was an attractive male, but because he was a good person—warm, encouraging, strong. Sylvia West must have seen those qualities in him. Perhaps the dark-eyed nurse still loved him, as Rose Calahan and others in the valley seemed to suspect.

Tracey felt an overpowering urge to know more about the dark-haired man beside her—about his love life, she admitted shamelessly to herself. More specifically, about his affair with Sylvia West. The two had been engaged for awhile. She didn't want to involve herself—she couldn't afford to risk her heart—if there was a chance that the embers of that old flame might flare up again.

"I . . ." she began, searching for words.

"You've heard talk in this valley," he said, when she couldn't go on. "About Sylvia and me."

"Yes," she admitted.

"We were engaged for awhile. But it wasn't any good." His voice grew almost gruff. "We both realized that. We had both needed someone. I don't want to sound like a Don Juan. Especially to you, Tracey. But I want you to

know how it was. There was someone before Sylvia. A nurse at the hospital where I served my residency. She led me a merry chase. Then . . . Well, to sum it up, I got my fingers burned. They were still smarting, when I came home and hung out my shingle. Sylvia . . ."

"I understand," Tracey interrupted him, not wanting to hear the details of that affair. Her heart welled at the simple, almost boyish, earnestness in his voice. It wasn't easy for him to tell her what had been in his past. He wouldn't have had to . . .

"Sylvia had been through a rather disillusioning time, herself, with Bryson," he went on. "She's a determined girl, strong. That kind sometimes falls for a weak man. She's never got over his leaving her, the way he did. I suppose you've heard all about that, too," he added.

"Aunt Cory and Colt told me," she said.

"The story as they saw it," he said. "I happen to know Sylvia's side. She was desperate when the Flannery's baby contracted staph. Being Sylvia, she did what she thought was best. As it happened, things didn't work out. If the medication had been right, she'd have been an heroine." He paused. "About the other death, old George Peck. He was a patient of Bryson's. Bryson had dressed the wound for him, ordered medication."

"Aunt Cory told me that part," Tracey said.

"Sylvia had filed the card on Peck, herself. When the coroner came around to investigate, the card had disappeared from Bryson's files." He moved nearer to her, leaning his elbows on the veranda rail, his strong body jackknifed. "Sylvia did some checking through the Med Association after Bryson ran out on her—that's what it amounted to. He'd asked for his ring back. Packed up and left town. It turned out that he'd graduated at the bottom of his class. He'd had trouble locating an internship. A small hospital had finally accepted him, because they lacked adequate personnel. It happens, you know," he added. She nodded agreement. "He didn't last long there. Came to be known as Staph Bryson." He gave Tracey a significant look. "One way or another, Bryson finished his training obligation, and went into practice. A year on the coast. Another in Washington. Another year

here. Long enough for Sylvia to become involved. She as much as admitted to me, when we called off our engagement, that she is still carrying a torch. 'If only I had tried harder to help poor Dave,' she said to me. The blind leading the halt, or vice versa." He gave Tracey a look. "You've guessed about Sylvia, haven't you?"

She remembered Sylvia West's trembling hands with a sudden new significance. The Baxter bottle she had dropped with a shattering crash while they worked over Gus Shultz . . . the shaking palsy . . . Parkinson's disease. Cory Flynn had said that Sylvia's father suffered from the debilitating tremors, the muscular weakness and rigidity that would gradually increase. What a strange and bitter coincidence that the same disease had attacked his daughter.

She caught her breath, remembering symptoms—the fine tremors of hand and foot that would spread until every part of the body had become involved; the lack of facial expression. She suddenly saw Sylvia West's blank-appearing face, with only the dark eyes registering emotion, when the girl was upset.

"How terrible," she whispered.

"Her father guessed, before he died," Dr. Malone said. "I've felt obligated to keep her on at the hospital as long as possible. She wanted me to make her director of Nursing Services. I had to refuse, of course, for several reasons. And she has come to accept my decision. I doubt if you or I will ever know how much the effort has cost her."

"But everyone thinks that you . . ." Tracey began.

"That I didn't want her, and she broke the engagement because of it," Dr. Malone finished for her. "That 'everyone' you mention will do an about face when they learn the truth. I have an idea they'll feel pretty much ashamed. Until then . . . Sylvia's not a person to complain, or explain." The melodious flow of his voice ceased for a moment. He reached to clasp her hand. "Now about us, Tracey. You and me."

You and me . . . A tremulous little thrill coiled through her veins. Paradoxically, an unidentifiable feeling of doubt followed in its wake. *Shan needed someone, and*

you were there . . . Sylvia West's words echoed in her mind. He had become involved with Sylvia West on the rebound from a hospital romance. Perhaps he was rebounding again, Tracey found herself thinking, because the romance with Sylvia West hadn't worked out.

She forced a light little laugh. "I see no reason why we can't see each other," she said.

"That isn't exactly what I had in mind," Dr. Malone said. "I think you know that, Tracey."

"I . . . I don't want to commit myself, just yet." She fumbled for words.

"It seems to be my turn to understand," Dr. Malone said. "But I don't, quite. Unless it's Colt . . ."

"I like Colt," she heard herself saying, to fill in the void that had come between them.

"I see," he said. "Goodnight, Tracey."

She watched him disappear off the veranda into the half light. He got into his little car and started the motor, without looking back. A second later, he was gone.

She watched him go, thinking that she liked Dr. Shannon Malone, too. More than she had cared to admit, even to herself.

16

SHE WAS STARTLED to see Sagebrush Tom hobbling a long the dusty road, on her way to the hospital, a week later. The old man hurried along, as though a thousand devils were after him, Tracey thought. The burlap bag hung across his shoulder, only half-filled, this time. His little flock of sheep was nowhere in sight. She slowed the station wagon that Cory Flynn had designated for her use, trying not to think how dirty and unkempt the old man was, as she offered him a lift to town.

Excitement burned in his eyes, that were clear and far-seeing in spite of his age. Tracey guessed that he could barely contain his news, whatever it was.

They had gone no more than half a mile, when he worked up enough courage to speak. "I saw her," he said. "I saw the White Maiden."

"Already?" Tracey asked, remembering that the fabled White Maiden ghost didn't walk the lush countryside surrounding the spring until October. Unless the leaves on the shimmering aspens and cottonwoods had already begun to turn . . .

"She's never shown herself this early before," Sagebrush Tom said, a strange naieveté illuminating his eyes. "There's something special about it. As though she knew I was trying to make that carving and wanted to help me along. Dr. Malone said he wanted it for his girl. I reckon that means you. I ain't ever seen him with no one else, since him and Sylvia West . . ." The old man bit off his words. "I just figured . . ."

"Dr. Malone told me he'd ordered a White Maiden,"

Tracey said, her cheeks growing warm. "But he didn't put it quite that way."

"Maybe he wasn't sure of you," Sagebrush Tom said, with absolute candor. "A man wants to be sure of his woman before he lets on to her. Saves him a big comedown."

Tracey couldn't help wondering why the old sheepherder had decided to come to town. The sack he carried was far from full. The few carvings and rocks jutting the coarse burlap wouldn't buy enough supplies to bother with. Unless he had wanted to tell someone about seeing the White Maiden. He seemed to be full of the story, almost to bursting.

Tracey glanced into the rear–view mirror, and saw a flash of red bearing down on them through the ground-hugging dust—Colt Malone.

"Drives like the devil was after him," Tom muttered. "Rides the same way. I seen him off beyond the spring. Colt and that Sonny Farrel."

"Was there a girl with them?" Tracey asked.

"The only female I've seen around the spring is the White Maiden," Tom chuckled. "Law, she's the prettiest little thing, in them white wedding clothes, and that silvery hair. All white, she is, like she just hopped down off of one of them big, soft clouds that are hangin' there over the mountains. I figured I'd come into town and get spruced up a little, if she's going to be calling." A secretive look took possession of the sheepherder's features.

Tracey wondered about it, noticing that Colt had come up behind them. He passed the station wagon, his eyes flashing. Without warning, he brought his fast car to a screeching halt, directly in the path of the car she drove. Tracey slammed on the brakes, sudden anger flaring in her blue eyes. Colt had no right . . . They could have slammed into him. All three of them might have been hurt.

"You really pick them, Tracey." Colt came to lean into the window, his turquoise eyes squinted a little with mirth, and something else, Tracey thought, as he glanced at Tom. "What's up, old timer? It's not like you to come into town so often."

The secretive look was still there in the old man's eyes, visible through the glaze of excitement. "I got me some business over at Blake's barber shop," Tom said. "These whiskers are starting to itch. Time I got rid of them. Going to get me some decent store clothes, too. I ain't so all fired old the ladies can't take a fancy to me."

"You've made quite an impression, Miss Talbot," Colt said, his white teeth exposed in a taunting grin.

"It ain't her," Sagebrush Tom said. "No offense, ma'm. You're mighty pretty. But seeing that Dr. Malone has already got his sights on you . . ."

Colt's eyes brightened. "What's this about you and Shan?"

"Just because Shan ordered me a White Maiden . . . One of Tom's carvings," she began.

Colt had lost interest in her, she realized suddenly, seeing the way he was looking at Sagebrush Tom. The old man was still talking, obsessed, Tracey thought, "I seen her last night, Colt. The White Maiden. And that ain't all." The secretive look gave way to something else, eagerness, Tracey analyzed it. "She . . . she spoke to me. Whispered. Asked me to meet her." His eyes looked triumphant.

"It's time you got into town again, Tom," Colt said. "You'll be talking to the trees out there, next, if you aren't already." He gave Tracey a look, then shifted his gaze back to Tom, amused. "Where's she meeting you, Tom? Mind if I come along? Join in the festivities?"

"I've talked too much already," Tom said, his wrinkled lips snapping tight over snuff darkened teeth.

Tracey glanced at her watch. "I'm due at the hospital in ten minutes," she said.

"I can take a hint," Colt grinned at her. "Have fun." His mouth smiled at her, showing white teeth. Above it, his turquoise eyes were hard in his tan face, calculating —the word popped unbidden into Tracey's mind.

She forgot the impression ten minutes later when she entered Dr. Malone's office to discuss the day's schedule. Since the night on Cory Flynn's veranda when he had asked her to be his girl, there had been a cool aloofness between them. If only she had said "yes," she thought

. . . She had wanted to. But there had been that little lingering doubt.

The morning was busy. Three new patients were admitted—a child who had stumbled into a bed of alkali bees, the fast—flying, handsome insects that nested in the alkali soil, and that the alfalfa raisers in the southern tip of the valley near the lake, relied on to pollinate their crops. The child, a little boy seven or eight years of age, had been badly stung. The second patient, a teenager with abdominal pain, was a possible appendectomy. Dr. Malone had ordered a leuocyte count. And there was a rancher who inadvertently grabbed the hot end of his branding iron.

Tracey leaned over the little boy's bed, felt her stocking give, and realized that it was the last pair of white nylons she owned. Some nurses resorted to ordinary nylons in an emergency. She refused to do that. It detracted from a nurse's professional appearance. She would make a quick trip downtown, during her lunch hour.

There was only one department store in town. Thank goodness, it stocked the trim, white hose she needed. She purchased half a dozen pairs and hurried out, to collide with a gaunt–faced man, wearing a pair of Levis that still smelled of store shelves and dye.

"Miss Talbot." His voice was croaky, familiar. Sagebrush Tom, she realized. He looked almost handsome, with his too–long hair cropped off above his ears, and the infested looking beard gone. He was old. As old as the hills, she thought. One of those fine-featured, wiry old men whose vitality never seemed to desert them.

"You . . . You look just fine," she told him. "I wouldn't have known you."

His face clouded. "Do you think she will?"

"I'm sure she will," Tracey found herself saying. As though she believed in ghosts, she thought.

She left him, a little smile dimpling her cheeks, at the old man's childlike belief in the local ghost. No doubt his last name was O'Leary, or something equally as Irish, she told herself. She had discovered that the entire upland valley has been settled by immigrants, from the Emerald Isle, back before the turn of the century. And although

most of them had dispensed with the leprechauns that had once hovered behind every bush and rock, according to Dr. Malone, Tom seemed to have retained that child-like naieveté that was characteristic of the race. A White Maiden was better than a little green man any day, Tracey found herself thinking in an amused way, as she entered the small hospital.

The rest of the day passed swiftly. She helped change Gus Shultz's dressings, and went to see Letty Byrd, when Rose Calahan came to her, her rosy face aglow, to tell her that the girl had actually smiled a little. "She's coming around," Rose said confidently. "She'll wake up for us one of these days."

Tracey was tired when she went out to the station wagon to drive home. A good kind of tired, she thought. She sat behind the wheel of the car for a brief moment before turning on the ignition, waiting, she admitted to herself, for Dr. Malone to come out. She had wanted to tell him about Sagebrush Tom. The day had been too full for that. Another time, she decided, pushing on the starter button.

17

SHE TOLD Dr. Malone about Sagebrush Tom the following morning. They were alone in his office. The phone hadn't rung for a miraculous ten minutes. She had taken advantage of the respite to brew fresh coffee in the nurse's room. She carried a cup of the steaming brew to Dr. Malone's office on a white enamel hospital tray. Rose Calahan had contributed a maple bar. The freckle-faced nurse kept an assortment of pastries in the nurse's room. "To give me strength," she laughingly told Tracey.

Dr. Malone had sent Tracey back to the small room for a second cup of coffee. "For yourself," he said. "We haven't had a chance to talk all week. I wanted to congratulate you on what a fine job you're doing."

She beamed with pleasure, and the atmosphere between them seemed to relax, enough for her to bring Sagebrush Tom and his strange antics into the conversation.

"You should have seen him," she told Dr. Malone. "All duded up, as Aunt Cory would say."

"This is the first time he's gone that far, for the White Maiden, or any other woman," Dr. Malone commented. Little lines of worry suddenly bracketed his handsome mouth. "I hope the old coot doesn't go completely overboard. He's strange enough as it is."

"He seems harmless," Tracy said.

Dr. Malone nodded. "I suppose so."

The telephone jangled and their moment of respite was over. She went about her duties in the crisp, methodical manner common to every good nurse. Letty Byrd stirred

in her high bed when Tracy entered her room, a small groan escaping her soft lips. It would be only a matter of time before the girl regained consciousness, Tracey thought, and her mother could take her home.

She checked on the boy with the bee stings, next. His body was covered with welts; his face puffed with poison. She took his pulse, and noted, with a sigh of relief, that it was near normal.

The appendectomy, next. They had operated at eight. Tracey had scrubbed for that one, to stand near the end of the table, aware of Dr. Malone's warm strength, and the dexterity of his skilled hands, as he removed the diseased finger of tissue. Sylvia West had circulated. Tracey had tried not to notice the patient expression in Dr. Malone's eyes, when the dark-eyed nurse dropped an instrument to the floor, with an accusing clatter.

She put Sylvia West out of her mind, stepping into the O.B. section of the tiny hospital. There were two maternity patients for her to check on, and to arrange lunch trays for, when an aide wheeled in the cart.

She spent the quiet period after lunch in supply, when patients either read or napped, a clipboard cradled in one arm, as she took inventory of the well-stocked shelves. She enjoyed her job at Teal Lake Hospital. And, she thought, she enjoyed being near Dr. Shannon Malone. More than a little . . .

It was time for four o'clock temps, before she realized it. And for a last minute check on her small, efficiently run domain, before she went off duty at five.

She crawled into the dust-covered station wagon that had the Flying Flynn brand stenciled on both doors, looking forward to a hot shower, and the surprisingly comfortable Western garb that everyone in the "yonder" country seemed to wear during their recreation hours, doctors and nurses included.

Dr. Malone's sleek little car wasn't in the small parking lot. She remembered that he had flown one of the small silver planes to the hospital that morning, the same plane that he used to visit the isolated ranches a hundred or two hundred miles away. His patients were scattered over a wide radius.

She started along the seemingly endless gravel road that led to the few widely scattered ranches south and west of town. As usual, the road was deserted. Far off, against the flanks of the mountains, the silver wings of a small plane glinted. Colt, she thought. Dr. Malone hadn't yet left the hospital. There had been no mention of Gus Shultz's missing cattle during the past week. The big ranchers were accustomed to losing a few head of cattle each year. But Gus Shultz wasn't a big rancher. It occurred to her that Colt might still be searching for the missing stock.

The turn-off to the isolated Shultz ranch was just ahead. She glimpsed something dark against the gray–white alkali. She saw, when she approached, that it was a dog. Sagebrush Tom's dog! The animal lay in the dust, his tongue lolling out, dripping. There was no sign of Tom, or of the little band of sheep.

She slowed the station wagon, her blue eyes searching the narrow road that sliced through sage and bitterbrush, toward the shack where the Shultz family lived. The road to White Maiden Spring intercepted it, somewhere beyond her range of vision. It was possible that the dog had run ahead of Tom; that the old hermit was there, hidden by the spraggly brush.

The dog lay with his head resting on his paws. He seemed to be waiting. She went on, thinking that if something had happened to Tom again, the dog would have been running and making a fuss to attract her attention. The wound on the old man's foot had healed quickly and well. Well enough for him to don new cowboy boots, in town, Tracey thought, remembering the way he had looked, when she saw him the day before, dressed in his new "store" clothes. She wondered, as she drove on toward the ranch, whether or not the White Maiden had appeared for him. If the ghost had failed to materialize for him, Tom would be gravely disappointed.

She turned into the lane that led to the Flying Flynn ranch house, still feeling uneasy about the dog. Her mind kept wondering back to him, as she showered and dressed, and went downstairs to dinner.

"What is it, dear?" Cory Flynn's concerned voice

broke into her thoughts. "It's not like you to woolgather."

Tracey glanced up. "I was doing just that, in a way," she admitted. "I saw Sagebrush Tom's dog this afternoon, over near Shultz's road. There was no sign of Tom or his sheep."

"If the dog was there, they were close by," Cory stated. "You can count on that."

"But they weren't," Tracey insisted. "I slowed down and looked."

"There are arroyos. And the brush is thick over that way. Poor grazing country. Gus Shultz was a fool to . . ."

"I'm worried about Tom," Tracey interrupted her aunt's critical musing. "Shan . . ." The name came so easily. "Dr. Malone," she amended hurriedly, "found Tom badly injured the last time the dog came out to the main road alone. The foot injury I told you about. Tom's all excited about the White Maiden. Something like that could have happened again."

"If you're worried about him, why don't you call Shan? The two of you could drive over that way this evening," Cory said, the crinkles around her eyes grouping in a conspiring smile. "There should be a moon . . ."

"Aunt Cory," Tracey said, smiling in spite of herself. "Your little scheme is absolutely transparent. You may as well know that Dr. Malone asked me to be his girl."

"Darling! That's wonderful!" Then, at the expression on Tracey's face. "You told him you would be, of course."

"I couldn't commit myself just yet," Tracey said, rising from the table. "I believe I will call the Malones, and talk to Dr. Malone about Tom. Or Colt, if Shan happens to be out on a call."

"I hope Shan is there," her aunt said. "I'd hate to see you get tangled up with the wrong Malone."

Tracey dialed the telephone with a determined finger. The more she thought about it, the more convinced she was that something had happened to Sagebrush Tom. It was a feeling she had. A premonition . . .

"Hello." It was Dr. Malone's melodious voice, thank goodness.

"Shan . . ." She never called him by his first name, although it had slipped out once or twice, when she mentioned him to others. "Dr. . . ."

"Tracey?" He had recognized her voice.

"Yes. I'm worried about something," she blurted. "Aunt Cory thought I should call you. It's Tom. I saw his dog tonight as I was on my way home from the hospital. He seemed to be just lying there beside the road, waiting."

"I didn't come by that way tonight," Dr. Malone said. "I'd have spotted him from the plane, if I had. Tom, too, probably. It might be a good idea to run over that way, just to be sure everything is all right. I'll pick you up in ten minutes."

Just like that, Tracey thought, hanging up the phone. Her heart had taken on a faster tempo, when she turned away. She found herself looking forward to being with Dr. Shannon Malone in the moonlit night, searching the desert–like countryside for the old man and his sheep. The thought held an element of excitement.

Dr. Malone arrived promptly, to help her into the small black car, and send them spinning along the Flying Flynn driveway onto the gravel road.

They were still a quarter of a mile away from the Shultz's turn-off, when Tracey glimpsed the dog, in the bright light from the car's headlamps. The brindle–coated animal jumped up at the sound of the approaching car and danced around in the center of the road, barking excitedly. When they reached him, he darted onto the road that led to the Shultz ranch, turning, stopping to look back, as though he were waiting for them to follow.

"I'll be darned," Dr. Malone said. "He remembered the car."

"You're the one he was waiting for," Tracey said. "Because you came to Tom's rescue last time the dog came to this spot." Then, as she realized what she had said. "You don't suppose something has happened."

"It could have," Dr. Malone said. "I hope you don't mind a few dog hairs. We can't let him run all the way back to the spring."

He stopped the car and called softly to the dog. The

animal leaped willingly into the little car, to crouch beside Tracey's legs, whining a little with fright as they spun through the darkness. He barked as they passed the trail that led to the waterhole where they had glimpsed Smokey Denton and Sonny Farrel, the first time Dr. Malone brought her to the spring.

When the car stopped near the clusters of aspen and cottonwood that towered over the pool, the dog leaped out, barking anxiously, running back the way they had come.

"That's odd," Dr. Malone said. "There's nothing back there. That old dried-up waterhole, stuck out in nowhere. Tom wouldn't take his flock there."

"He said the White Maiden had spoken to him. She asked him to meet her," Tracey recalled. "Maybe his hallucinations have led him astray."

"We'll follow the dog," Dr. Malone said. "In his present state of mind, Tom might have done something crazy."

They had to abandon the small car and follow the trail to the waterhole on foot. Dr. Malone took out his black bag and reached for a flashlight. He directed the bright beam along the overgrown path, letting Tracey walk ahead. Somewhere far off a coyote howled at the slice of moon that had appeared above the dark rim of the mountains to the east. Tracey shivered a little at the sound, eagerly aware of Dr. Malone's presence, behind her.

The dog was still barking, somewhere ahead of them. A jackrabbit bounced through the ray of light in front of her. They had been making their way through the tough, grasping brush for what seemed like an eon, when Dr. Malone suddenly stopped behind her. She knew, even before she turned to look at him, that he was listening.

"Did you hear it?" he asked softly.

She stood poised, and tense. Her ears picked up a sound. The tinkling of a bell—a sheep bell! She put the thought into words, letting her breath out, thinking that she had half expected to hear a woman's voice, soft, sweet, luring. She wouldn't have been surprised to see the White Maiden floating toward them, in that tense mo-

ment. The mundanity of the bell soothed her frazzled nerves.

The dog's bark came to them once more, muffled, as though he had been swallowed by the dark earth.

"He's gone into an arroyo," Dr. Malone said. "There used to be a deep wash near the waterhole. Bras and Colt and I had a string of traps set out there in our cowboy and Indian days. I haven't been back since."

They hurried on, half stumbling through the increasingly thick growth.

They found Sagebrush Tom a half hour later. The dog, his duty done, had grown quiet, as he worked around the frightened flock of sheep, bunched nearby. Tom lay on the ground, his head encrusted with dried blood. He was naked, Tracey saw, a sudden horror cutting through her. Something unspeakable had happened . . .

"Somebody's tried to scalp him," Dr. Malone put the something into words.

She remembered the tale he had told her of marauding Indians. There were Indians still in the area, scattered on the reservations. "Surely the Indians no longer do . . . things like this." She put her next thought into words.

"Of course not." Dr. Malone stripped off his jacket and spread it over Tom's limp body. Tracey reached automatically for the sparse old wrist. Before she could grasp it, Dr. Malone pressed his ear against Tom's sunken chest. "He's alive," he said. "His heart's strong." Her alert fingers confirmed his crisp words.

The old man's breathing was shallow, but steady. His eyes flickered open. "Doc . . . You have to help her."

Dr. Malone leaned close to examine Tom's lacerated scalp. "It's o.k., old timer. That dog of yours brought you some help."

"Help . . . her," the old man croaked, with an impotent wag of his hand. "The White Maiden."

"I'm afraid she passed beyond mortal aid a long time ago," Dr. Malone said kindly, patiently, his sensitive hands separating strands of Sagebrush Tom's white hair. "It's not as bad as it looks," he said to Tracey. "More like some kid playing at Indians. The line of the scalp has been scratched with the point of a knife." He paused, his

hands moving swiftly along the old sheepherder's hairline, his tan face bent close, in the focused beam of light. "Just scratched," he added, with a satisfied nod of his head. "There's a lump at the base of the skull." Then, "Who did this, Tom?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you." Sagebrush Tom's eyes were fever bright, with some pent–up fear or anger. "You've got to help her get away from them. Two of them. Naked savages the pair, with warpaint on their faces. They took her away. The White Maiden."

"You know there aren't any war-like Indians left around here, Tom," Dr. Malone said, in the same tone of voice he would have used to calm a frightened child. "We'll find your clothes, and get you dressed and out of this place. What made you leave the spring, in the first place?"

"She come for me last night, just like she said she would," Tom said. "I followed her over here. It wasn't until I looked back and seen them sneaking around the spring that I knew why she wanted to get me away from there. They saw us before we could get away, and followed. They did this to me. And the White Maiden . . . They took her off with them." The old man choked on the preposterous words. "Law, she was pretty," he added, his voice cracking.

"Where are your clothes, Tom?" Dr. Malone searched the immediate area, with the ray of light.

"I'm trying to tell you Doc," Tom croaked impatiently. "They took them and left me here, naked as a jaybird, while they carried her away."

"There's a sedative in my bag," Dr. Malone told Tracey. "I think it's come to that. We'll get him into town."

In spite of the sedative, administered by Tracey's small, firm hand, Sagebrush Tom continued to mumble his wild tale of painted Indians and the White Maiden, when they helped him into the small hospital an hour later, a ludicrous old scarecrow of a man, wrapped in the laprobe from Dr. Malone's car.

"You believe me, don't you, Doc?" the old man begged, when they had him settled in an immaculate bed,

and were ready to leave. "I've got this scratched head to prove they were there."

"Someone played a pretty strange trick on you, Tom," Dr. Malone admitted. "But I doubt if the Indians had anything to do with it. If it will make you feel any better, I'll go back out there tonight, and look around."

"Get the law to help you," Tom said. "Before it's too late for her. If it ain't already," he added, a moistness that looked suspiciously like tears dampening his eyes.

"I'll see what I can do, Tom," Dr. Malone said.

18

DR. SHANNON MALONE asked Tracey to accompany him back to White Maiden Spring. "I think it's time that ghost out there was laid," he said. "And those wild Indians Tom has been raving about all evening."

"But someone really did . . ." Tracey began.

"That scratch around his hairline was a clumsy attempt. The work of a kid playing Indian," Dr. Malone said. "And Tom's been pretty childish lately, with his ghost stories. If there'd been a more convincing lump on his head . . . but it was just a bump."

"Do you think he did that to himself?" Tracey asked. "Surely he'd have kept his clothes on while he waited for someone to find him."

"It's a way to get attention," Dr. Malone said. "Sometimes when a man has lived to himself as long as Tom has, he gets some strange notions."

She remained silent, content to sit beside him in the bucket seat and admire the passing countryside, transformed by the moonlight to a silvery-hued panorama. As preposterous as the old man's tale had been, it wasn't difficult to imagine a file of painted braves riding the rimrock. Or dashing across the valley itself, on their spotted ponies . . . If she didn't watch herself, she thought, with a wry smile, she would be seeing the White Maiden, next, complete with wedding gown.

The glistening trees, grouped around the spring came into view. They had by-passed the trail that led to the old waterhole, dry this time of year, and the deep wash where

Tom's sheep were still bunched, under the watchful eye of the faithful dog.

The old shack huddled beneath the ancient junipers looked ghostly, its weathered boards bleached to the color of old bones. Beyond it, glistening through the trees, was a perfect reflection of the autumn moon, cast up from the glossy surface of the pond. Tracey shivered a little at the sheer beauty of the place, the almost frightening eeriness. If there were a White Maiden, she found herself thinking, it seemed probable that they would see her.

"Afraid?" Dr. Malone had felt her tremble beside him.

"Not too," she said.

"We'll check the shack first. If his clothes are there . . ." He stopped the car near the junipers, not finishing the thought. "I have an idea there's some simple explanation, for what we found tonight," he added.

They made their way through the grass that was moist and green still, and that smelled strangely sweet, after the dry scent of autumn browned sage and rabbitbrush. The shack loomed suddenly before them. Dr. Malone pushed open a door that hung crookedly on leather straps and they went inside.

The beam from the flashlight picked out the crude shape of a homemade cot against one wall. A ragged coat hung on a peg in one corner. The greasy sack that Tom used to carry his carvings to town sagged across a homemade chair. There was no sign of the old man's clothing.

Dr. Malone glanced at her in the half-light. "Apparently, my theory was wrong," he said. "Let's look around outside. We won't find much, even in this moonlight. But I promised Tom I'd try."

Tracey found herself making an effort to walk softly —and listen. The grass on the far side of the pond, created by the seep of water from the spring, gleamed in the moonlight, each blade a strand of silver. Dr. Malone stopped suddenly, his hand tensing at her elbow. "We're not alone here," he said, in a husky whisper. "This way."

He grasped her arm, hurrying her along a faint path that wound between the rustling aspens and cottonwoods. The white trunks of the aspens seemed to glow in the moonlight. The beam from the flashlight picked up the

red-gold of a falling leaf, a flame of warmth in the silvery night.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"Sounds like cattle to me," Dr. Malone said.

She listened. Another dozen yards, and the faint sounds came to her. His hearing, accustomed to the desert sounds, had been more acute than her own.

The arroyo that contained the spring and the pond, spread out, widening into a small meadow, at its head. She could make out a dark smudge at its far end. Dr. Malone flashed the light across it, as they grew nearer, and she saw that it was brush, piled neatly, to form a barricade, a fence, of sorts. She could make out the dark shape of cattle beyond it, grazing contentedly in a willow thicket.

"Gus Shultz's missing stock," Dr. Malone said.

"But who . . ."

"Somebody wanted to fatten them up quick, on this good grass. That's why whoever it is scared Tom off."

"That's rustling," she said in a disbelieving voice.

"Exactly," Dr. Malone said. "We'll get the sheriff out here, first thing in the morning."

They started back toward the car, following the faint path. The pond shimmered, molten silver in the moonlight. Tracey held her breath, captivated by the mysterious beauty of it. The air was crisp, with the first hint of fall. She was feeling grateful for the comforting warmth of Dr. Malone's arm, when, without warning, he slipped it around her waist. Something moved on the far side of the pond, beyond the first, lush ranks of grass—something white. She stopped, catching her breath, thinking of the White Maiden. But there was no such thing as a ghost, she reasoned with herself, watching the white blur grow. Dr. Malone's arm tightened around her, pressing her close.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Quiet," he whispered, steering her into the shadows cast by one of the whispering trees.

She leaned close against his sturdy, warm body, her heart hammering behind her ribcage. The white thing on the other side of the pond seemed to be coming toward

them, assuming a definite form, as it seemed to grow taller.

"The White Maiden," she whispered, awe-struck, as the moonbeams illuminated billowing white satin.

"Or a facsimile thereof," Dr. Malone said. "And not a very good one, at that," he added.

She watched the white form move toward them from the far side of the pond, becoming more distinct. She noted, with a feeling of surprise, that the White Maiden wore a veil. Sagebrush Tom's little carving hadn't been veiled, she thought. There had been a wreath of wild flowers, carved in intricate detail, around the tiny head. And the gown . . . it had been different, somehow, less detailed, simple. This White Maiden wore an elaborate wedding ensemble, with a shimmer that looked like sequins illuminating the bodice. As the figure moved nearer, it seemed to lose its ethereal quality.

"Come on." Dr. Malone's strong fingers closed around her elbow. "We're going to meet the White Maiden in person." He half pulled her from the shelter of the trees, as though he were afraid the ghost might get away.

The white-gowned form on the other side of the pond had stopped. Tracey knew that whoever she was—human or ghost—the girl was watching them, her face clouded by a billow of white veiling.

"Go back." The voice, faint, eerie, drawn-out, drifted across the pond. It sounded vaguely familiar, Tracey thought. All fear seemed to have drained from her. A wild kind of excitement possessed her, as she stumbled through the knee-high grass beside the dark haired doctor.

The white-gowned form across the pond took flight, disappearing as she had come, seeming to grow mysteriously shorter, as though she were being absorbed by the earth.

"Nice effect," Dr. Malone said. "Ten to one there's a convenient arroyo over there for her to melt into."

It seemed miles around the foot of the pond. They had gone no more than halfway when the sound of horses' hooves came to them. Dr. Malone stopped, silencing her

with an uplifted hand, his handsome head tilted, as he listened.

"The White Maiden has a couple of accomplices," he said. "There." He pointed toward the east, where the rimrock had become a dark ledge between moonlit sage and illuminated sky. Tracey made out the shapes of riders, one of them in flowing white. The horses, their legs obscured by the brush seemed to glide over the rough lava-strewn terrain at a breathtaking speed.

Without warning, one of the animals lunged forward, pitching its rider into the air. A terrifying scream reached them, the shrill cry of an animal in pain. The horse rolled awkwardly into the sage.

The animal's cry was followed by the piercing scream of a woman. "Colt!" The single word shattered the air.

She felt Dr. Malone tense beside her, heard his quick-drawn breath, as he recovered himself. "I hope his horse didn't fall on him," he said. "I'll need my bag. There's a gun behind the seats. We'll need that, too."

She turned and ran back toward the car, thinking that she should have guessed. There had been three riders out near the old waterhole the day she and Dr. Malone came to the spring to dress Sagebrush Tom's foot—Colt Malone, Sonny Farrel, and Smokey Denton. The girl had tried to pass as the White Maiden. Tracey tried not to think about the rustled cattle, hidden in the willows up the canyon from the spring, as she ran through the moonlit silence toward the sleek black car.

She reached the car, lifted out the familiar black bag, and fumbled behind the seat for the gun. A deer rifle . . . Dr. Malone was an outdoor man in his free hours, and hunting season would be opening soon.

Dr. Malone had reached the fallen horseman by the time she started back around the pond. The two riders had dismounted, and were kneeling beside him, the shiny satin of the ghost-girl's wedding dress gleaming in the moonlight. The White Maiden had removed her veil. Tracey glimpsed silvery tresses, and knew that she had been right about the riders' identity.

The girl in white arose suddenly, and mounting her horse, road at a breakneck speed toward Tracey. "Shan's

bag." Smokey Denton leaned out of the saddle, her face white and frightened above her reaching arm.

Tracey handed the bag up to her, one hand still clutching the gun. The girl wheeled her horse, the bag clutched against the white gown. Seconds later, she was handing it down to Dr. Malone, dismounting again, to lean over the fallen horseman. Colt, Tracey thought, running, oblivious to the sharp spraggles of sage and bitterbrush that clutched at her riding pants.

Colt Malone lay on the ground beside the fallen horse, resisting Dr. Malone's attempt to administer an analgesic, his teeth gleaming in a pained grimace.

"Not until I've taken care of Lady," he said.

"Please, Colt. Darling." Smokey Denton leaned over him. "I'll do it. Or let Sonny."

Colt ignored her, reaching toward Tracey. She realized that he wanted the rifle. She glanced at Dr. Malone.

"Give it to him," he said.

Balancing on one elbow, Colt pressed the gun butt into his shoulder, and took careful aim. A white froth frosted the mare's mouth. Her eyes rolled back in her head, with pain.

"Broken leg," Dr. Malone told Tracey, taking her arm, leading her off a little way. "Colt's favorite mare. She stepped in a hole of some kind."

The shot resounded through the still night, carrying to bounce off of the rimrock, ten miles away.

"What about Colt?" she asked.

"The same as his horse," Dr. Malone said. "We'll fix up a stretcher. Get him to the hospital."

"I'm sorry," she said. "For everything."

"You think those three are responsible for the disappearance of Gus's cows, don't you," he said. "And for Tom . . ."

She nodded, wishing that she didn't have to be honest.

"So do I," he said quietly, going to kneel once more beside his brother.

19

TRACEY sat at the small table in the sunny kitchen of the big ranch house. She was having breakfast alone, thinking over the events of the night before. Colt Malone had been badly shaken up by the fall from his horse. And, as Dr. Malone had suspected, his leg had been broken. Smokey Denton had accompanied them to the hospital, refusing to leave Colt's side. They had left Sonny Farrel alone on the desert, to ride back to the Farrel ranch, leading Smokey Denton's silver-colored horse.

She tried not to think about the cattle grazing the lush grass at White Maiden Spring, as she took a sip of the steaming hot coffee that Cory Flynn placed before her.

"There's no doubt in my mind that Colt was in on it," Cory was saying. "Sonny and Smokey, too. Bull's always said he'd rather have Sonny turn rustler, than to go rodeoing. Seems to me that Bull's sung that tune once too often, and Sonny's taken him up on it."

"But Colt," Tracey protested. "Why would he . . . ?" She cut herself short, glancing out of the window to see Dr. Malone's car coming up the driveway, its sleek sides powdered with alkali. Someone sat beside him in the bucket seat.

"Sagebrush Tom," Cory said, going to fling open the door in a typical Western welcome. "How's Colt, Shan?" she called.

"He'll do, Cory." Dr. Malone came, to glance past her at Tracey, the flickering flames of light illuminating his eyes. "Tom's got a little something for you," he told her. "He insisted on delivering it in person."

The old man stepped into the kitchen, his eyes bright and shy. The shallow wound that ran around his skull was barely visible through the strands of white hair that had been combed to cover it. He took a brown package from the inside of his shirt and handed it to her.

"Doc and me both have a little something for you," he said.

She reached for the package, her blue eyes curious. She pulled the string that held the brown wrapping in place and the paper fell aside to reveal a carving—the White Maiden.

"The original," the old man told her. "I . . . I couldn't finish the one Doc ordered for you, after . . . after what happened."

"What did happen?" Cory asked.

"Smokey posed as the White Maiden to lure Tom away from the spring," Dr. Malone said. "They had the cattle hidden out at the old waterhole," he added. "But it went dry on them, and the grass didn't hold out."

He hadn't mentioned Colt's name. Tracey glanced up at him, her eyes questioning. "There were just the two of them, then?"

"I'm afraid Colt was in on it, too, Tracey, just as you thought. He didn't help run those cattle off of the Shultz spread. But he knew what Sonny and Smokey were up to and took part in their little scheme to scare Tom." His handsome face darkened. "The Indians Tom saw were actually Sonny and Colt stripped down, with some grease paint smeared on their faces and a turkey feather stuck in their hair. They took Tom's clothes to keep him from going into town, and arousing suspicion. In a lot of ways, Colt has never grown up."

"What about Gus's cows," Cory Flynn said.

"Back at Gus's place," Dr. Malone said. "Tom and I drove out to the spring early this morning with the sheriff. The cattle had disappeared."

"Sonny," Tracey said, remembering that they had left him alone, in the moonlight.

Dr. Malone nodded. "It must have taken him most of the night to drive them home." He drew a breath. "Smokey told me the whole story last night after I sent you

home from the hospital. Sonny figured the only way he'd ever get together enough money to buy the fancy gear he wanted to go rodeoing was by turning rustler. Bull helped put that idea into his head." Cory Flynn nodded agreement. "Gus Shultz never got around to branding his herd, and Sonny figured he'd never make it as a rancher anyway. So Sonny and Smokey snipped a few strands of wire, and drove them off. Colt helped them hide the herd. Flew over in his plane to be sure they wouldn't be easy to spot from the air."

"What happens now?" Tracey asked.

"Gus has his cattle back, sleeker than they were when they disappeared," Dr. Malone said. "It cheered him up considerably to hear that bit of news. As for Sonny, Sheriff Coombs went over to try to reason with Bull after we left the Shultz place. I have an idea Sonny will be riding the rodeo circuit with Smokey this next season, fancy trappings and all."

"And Colt will follow," Tracey heard herself saying.

Dr. Malone nodded. "This old coot here refuses to press charges, although I can't for the life of me see why."

"You've been good to me, Doc," Tom said. "I ain't about to have your brother thrown into the hoosegow. Young whippersnapper. Got a mean streak in him. But he'll grow out of it."

Dr. Malone gave Sagebrush Tom a grateful look. "I expect Colt will be hitting the trail when Smokey does," he said to Tracey. "Sorry?" He gave her a look.

His question had caught her off guard. She would miss Colt, when he left the valley, she thought, in the way that any colorful personality is missed. Her life would be quieter, more stable, without the impetuous young rancher stopping by the Flying Flynn, to take her riding off across the desert with him. Surprisingly, she felt a sense of relief.

And Shannon Malone would still be there . . .

Dr. Malone and Cory Flynn were both watching her, waiting for her reply.

She smiled up at them. "I'll be too busy to really miss him," she said. She glanced down at the carving in her hand, the perfectly executed White Maiden. There was

something ethereal about the tiny face, beneath the dainty, flower-bedecked hair-do. Dr. Malone had wanted to buy it for her the first time she saw Tom. Now it was hers, a gift from the old man, whose dream of the White Maiden had somehow been shattered.

She didn't quite understand . . .

"There's something out at the corral I want to show you, Tom," Cory was saying.

Tracey glanced up to see her aunt lay a conspiring hand on the old sheepherder's sleeve, and guide him toward the door. Tom went willingly, leaving Tracey alone with Dr. Malone.

"You're like her," Dr. Malone said, indicating the little carving in her hands, with the tilt of his dark head. "The fulfillment of a man's dream. There's not a male living who doesn't picture a White Maiden, in his mind's eye. I have an idea Tom will find his Maiden again, after last night's disillusionment has worn off. And she'll still be as lovely and pure as the water from the spring that was named for her."

Tracey felt her face flush beneath his intent gaze. His eyes were bright with pent-up desire.

"You're like her," he said again. He came to stand beside her, the good masculine soap and leather smell of him growing in her nostrils. "I've had to lecture myself more than once, these past weeks, for thinking about you when you weren't there, within calling and touching distance. For wishing that you were." He hesitated. "For thinking that you were off with Colt, somewhere."

He had cared enough to be jealous, she thought, with a little tingle of gladness. If only she had known . . . But she hadn't. She had kept remembering Sylvia West's words—*Shan needed someone, and you were there . . .* She had deliberately restrained her heart for fear that she might not be there, sometime, when he needed warmth and consolation, and that he would turn to someone else. She had been afraid to leave her own heart open to hurt and jealousy . . .

Dr. Malone had taken a tissue wrapped package from his black bag, and was holding it toward her, looking appealingly boyish.

"The gift Tom mentioned," he said. "In lieu of the White Maiden."

She opened his offering with trembling hands. A figurine, carved from the same gold-toned wood that Tom had used for the White Maiden—Oregon sage, Tracey recalled—came into view. A tiny nurse's cap, perfectly executed, rode minute curls, her own curls, she realized, with a little gasp. And her face. The hands and feet were her own, too. And the figure swelling beneath the detailed uniform . . .

"My White Maiden," Dr. Malone said.

"Did Tom . . . ?" she began.

He shook his head. "A man has to find his White Maiden for himself," he said.

In the next instant, he reached for her, drawing her close. "Tracey," he whispered into her hair. "I need you."

"I'm here," she murmured, a wealth of love brimming in her heart. "Darling, I'm here."

THE END

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